

Under Ivy

The children's park is just a *stone's throw* from the new house, but so far Millie has only seen it from the car: granite ridges that reveal, from the road, curving castle walls and turrets that, even at a distance, are like the caricatures of castles and turrets. She images more: dragons and trolls, perhaps, and oversized mushrooms, with orange tops dappled white—everything nestled into the outcrop and impossibly pitched into the bright cold heights of cloudless sky. At the road-side entrance is a ticket booth inside the figure of a dour-looking gnome, a good few metres high in his pointed green hat; he is otherwise mostly a cascade of beard and slant of nose. One day soon, Millie thinks, she will walk there, pushing the baby in the pram—though the incline from the ticket station to the carpark and then the park itself looks, for now, impossibly steep.

Go easy, go slowly, the midwife reminds her. Exercising is good, but take care not to overdo it.

Millie would like to walk; to dress herself and the baby cosily in their respective items of knitwear and weatherproof coats and set out into the days. She'd like to go anywhere really, to move from in and with her body—yet mostly she and the baby stay on the living-room sofa, in their respective sleepwear or tracksuits. The baby dozes at Millie's breast, jaw juddering. The feeds are less painful now; the grazes and blisters on her nipples settled (the skin toughened—roughened, perhaps). Instead, Millie's worries now relate to *bad habits*; hers and the baby's, indivisible really.

You do know she's asleep now, not drinking, the midwife chided (gently, Millie thought) at her last postpartum clinic visit.

Oh, Millie said. No, I wasn't sure. The baby's mouth was still closed around the breast; she'd seemed to be sucking, her eyes closed, her rosy eyelids twitching dreamily.

Can't you tell, she's not swallowing?

Millie couldn't—can't—tell anything much: the minutiae in excess, all so impossibly new and alien.

When Adam is home he agrees, yes, it would be nice to go walking; no, the baby shouldn't sleep on her breast if the midwife says not to do that—if the advice is to put her into the cot awake-but-sleepy, so she can learn to go to sleep, to self-soothe. Yes, they should all three go exploring, soon.

Exploring this part of the world, that is: where they live now, which is not so far from where they lived (separately) before now; where the rent is really quite affordable on their unfixed incomes, and it only takes half an hour to drive to the regional university campus where Adam is teaching for the semester—where Millie herself was teaching, casually, before the baby.

The local townships are positively descriptive, with prefixes like *Lovely*—and it's true that it is lovely here, with green paddocks and milky cold air, so often thick with fog, though other days bring rich winter light that drops heavy shadows across the winding roads. Stepping into those shadows must, Millie feels, be like dropping into deep blue water, or emerald pools—an atmosphere altogether different from standing in the opulent gilt of the sun.

On the main road there is a general store with a red post box, an orange phone booth, a lone petrol bowser; stacked bags of fire wood for sale, and Streets ice-cream billboards across the shop's verandah façade. The adjacent paddocks are populated by cows and goats, alpacas and ponies—some of the ponies or horses palominos, Millie thinks by their coats and manes in shades of cream and gold. There is the smell of chimney smoke whenever she steps outside, onto the porch—and seen on rare ventures further out, the chimneys themselves on the roofs of other people's houses, puffing visibly, though with surprising delicacy: the smoke graceful somehow, there and gone in its own momentary unfurling.

Their own heating comes from a four-bar gas heater of orange panels in dark mesh, which makes a terrible clanking to ignite with the repeated press switch. Even with her furniture and Adam's inside it now—with their artworks and photos on the walls and fridge, and with all of the things for the baby—the house feels like the home of somebody else's grandparents; like a house she might have visited during childhood. There is apricot shag carpet in the living room, bedrooms and hall. The small square tiles of the kitchen floor are bottle-blue; the tiles of the bathroom and the bath itself lilac. Outside there are dark uneven bricks for a porch under ivy, and beyond that stretches of grass, roses, fruit trees, birches; a love-gate supporting some kind of climber, and a bench of slatted panels. A garden somebody has tended to, before them.

She had thought they would be happy here, and perhaps they will be—all of it is still so new. The baby, for her part, is perfect, even in her unknowability. What Millie hopes is love arrives in sensations of acute awe and terror at this commitment they've made, rendered physical and binding: this whole tiny person, with them now, outside of and beyond her pregnant body. All three of them ever more keenly alive and mortal, somehow, as a result.

The baby had wailed the whole car ride home from the last midwife appointment. Sitting in the backseat, next to the infant capsule—Adam in the front, driving—Millie had

looked at her daughter's closed eyes and thought: asleep or awake, awake or asleep? Surely such crying was conscious, alive to the world, though the baby often seems to inhabit some kind of liminal space.

Millie herself has started to weep unstoppably, most days—all normal, the midwife assured cheerily; all the work of hormones! Still, Adam implores her for answers, asking: But what's *wrong*?

I'm just tired, Millie had tried on the fifth morning after the birth, her face wet above the kitchen sink.

We're *all* tired, Adam said back to that, and looking over at the sleeping baby against his chest, she'd thought: Well, I don't know—a true not-knowing; she was sincere in her ambivalence.

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When Ella and Emmi arrive it is hours later than she would roughly have expected them, if they'd arranged a time—the sun is slanting in low through the porch ivy, darkening the cream-and-jade patterned leaves into one solid shape. In the first days home from the hospital Millie was wild about time: every stretch of the baby's sleeping and waking was counted, clocked. Another friend had arrived to visit fifteen minutes earlier than they'd stipulated, and Millie had felt such complete resentment, fleeced of those extra minutes for which she'd been about to deposit the finally restful baby into Adam's arms and step into a hot shower.

Now she sees, through the living room window, the sleek silver sedan, which seems to pull up noiselessly: Millie perceives only faintly the gliding crunch of its tyres in the gravel, rather than sound from the car's engine; the vehicle itself. She watches her friends clamber out of the car—how bright and well they look, even at a distance: they are all shiny, shapely hair; matte skin and flushed cheeks. Their bodies keep trembling with chatter and laughter, and they pause a couple of times on their way up the uneven driveway, voices pitching—affording each line of delivery, each response, a moment of its own, before composing themselves.

Hello, Figgy Stardust! they sing at the sliding glass door. Your other mums are here!

Millie unlatches the door and opens it, ushers them inside.

The baby has been called The Fig since she was roughly that small-fruit size in utero—how many weeks' gestation Millie can't recall now, but it had gone: rice grain, berry, fig, avocado ... and so on, up to melon.

Her true name seems reserved for grandparents. Millie and Adam, for their part, call her ‘the baby’—or other, newer monikers of their more recent devising. She is briefly asleep now, in a Moses basket on the coffee table, zipped into a sleeping-bag swaddle for infants that suspends her hands at the level of her face, for comfort, apparently—and so that she can’t startle herself awake by flinging about her arms. She looks to Millie vaguely like a tea cosy, her parcelled hands vaguely like seal flippers in the pockets of fabric that keep them lifted to each side of her small head.

Ella and Emmi lean over her in what at first seems like reverential quiet, until Ella says in a stage whisper: Hello, ugly baby!

Millie feels her body tighten, and sees Ella and Emmi exchange eye contact—Ella’s eyeliner winged perfectly; Emmi’s smokier, crayoned charcoal across and under her lashes, and shaded across the crease around each eye socket, making the shape of each eyelid *pop*. Both of them are mercilessly beautiful, and brimming with mirth that Millie worries she is dissipating, spoiling, already.

Oh, says Ella, I’m joking of course! You know I think *all* babies are ugly, but she’s actually the most perfect little thing—really. She could be the baby in the nappy ads, or those things— She gestures to the packet of wipes, and Millie notices, dimly, the stock-photo babies smiling or reposing in the images on the various corners of packaging; the room so full of newborn paraphernalia.

Next they appraise her. You look like *such a mum*, they say. It’s so lovely! Are you living the dream life here? Is it country-life bliss? Are you drinking lots of wine?

Yes, says Millie, and then, No—I’m so tired at night now, I pretty much just go to bed once the baby is asleep. Plus, I never know with breastfeeding, when she’ll be hungry again. It’s hard to time it?

Oh, Ella says, her voice light but dull—or is it that Millie is being dull, showing her dullness, dourly? She can’t seem to string apart the words in her head from those she voices, and in a rush she realises how boring and how inane she will sound, the longer they converse; how muddy and slow her thoughts feel at the moment.

But, says Ella, you know that your milk would only have, like, the tiniest percentage of alcohol in it, right? You deserve to enjoy yourself, if you want to that is.

Emmi agrees. You were such a wino before! she says.

They stopped at a winery for lunch first, they explain when Millie asks about the drive—the time and traffic, and whether it was all okay, getting here?

Millie feels this sting, somehow. A place close by? she asks, because there seem to be cellar doors everywhere, and they say no, not really—but not far off the highway. When they explain it she knows the one by its sign: an estate near the university—the campus Adam will surely be leaving soon, after staying on after his classes to mark papers; once he’s done he’ll order a takeaway dinner to pick up and bring home.

Of the winery lunch, Millie imagines a succession of tiny courses on vast plates, but Ella and Emmi say no, just pizzas—sourdough bases out of a wood-oven: so good!

They have a bottle of wine with them now—which Emmi *stole*! Ella announces, and they dissolve into raucous laughter at this.

From the winery? Millie says dumbly, and Emmi says yes! No one was serving us and they had wall after wall of bottles, it was just asking to be lifted, just ridiculous.

So it’s hot wine, do you want some of our hot wine? Ella chimes, holding the bottle erect, with a flourishing gesture.

Millie goes to the kitchen for glasses; rummages in the fridge, where the champagne Ella and Em brought to the hospital for her, after the birth, is still chilling on its side. She takes out packets of soft cheese, smoked fish and cured meats: things she had bought for after her labour, to look forward to through the last weeks of her pregnancy, but hasn’t thought to eat since, despite the inexhaustible hunger of breastfeeding.

Does the house smell like sour milk? she asks abruptly from the kitchen counter, and Ella and Emmi smile.

It smells like *baby*, the most wonderful smell in the world, they say.

Then Ella looks at the carpet, the arms of the sofa, across to Millie’s clothes.

Are they spew patches I keep seeing? They look like jizz, she announces.

Millie grimaces: it’s possible she will need to shampoo the shag flooring, she’s considered. The baby, Figgy, wakes once the wine is poured, the food laid out on a chopping board, and then Millie is pacing in front of the heater, rocking, patting and shushing—keeping little Figgy Stardust in motion, washed in whatever white noise she can produce with her mouth, her voice. Once the baby is lulled again, Millie finds herself talking about the children’s park. She thinks of all the European fairy tales made familiar and sanitised by the animated movies of her childhood, which never included the likes of ‘Bluebeard’—no surprise, with its forbidden room hacked-apart wives; its door key tacky with blood.

The park was built in the 1950s, she’s read online, by a German family, and comprises cavernous spaces and cubby-like structures of puppets and story characters that can be prompted into sound and motion with the press of a button.

Oh, says Emmi of the park, we must take The Fig! Won't she love it?

Briefly Millie thinks they mean to go now, today, but Emmi is refilling their wine glasses, and of course, the day itself is nearly gone.

Figgy is nuzzling at Millie's chest. Awake, her eyes are the darkest shade of blue; their liquid stare surprises Millie in its intensity, its apparent focus. Millie sits to lift her shirt. She unhooks and opens her nursing bra, then, once the baby is latched onto her nipple and drinking, Ella and Em sit on the floral sofa at either side, leaning in to watch.

She really is so perfect, they say to the back of the baby's head, where her silky hair is darkest, thickest, but with a squarish bare patch forming, where it's already rubbed away in sleep.

Do you feel like such a mammal, now that you're lactating? they ask.

And then: How is your healing, how are your stitches?

I'm okay, I think, says Millie. But, she adds, it's strange how people I don't know so well feel like they can just ask. Like they ask, *did you have a caesarean*, like it's just small talk, and I don't know what to say so then I tell them everything, too much, more than I want to share? Or like, Adam's uncle asked really specific questions, and I don't know who told him, to begin with, that I had bad tearing.

She realises her eyes are wet, ready to stream unanticipated, unnecessary tears.

Honestly, mate, Emmi says mildly, I think people are just being polite, just trying to be nice.

The baby gags and splutters at her breast—it's hard to tell, sometimes, how forceful the milk jet is; if she's getting anything at all, at times, even when she seems to gulp and swallow rapidly.

Em and Ella startle and laugh.

That happened to me once, giving head, says Emmi. I can't even remember who to, just that *feeling!* Horrible. She addresses the baby: It will happen to you too one day, sorry, babe—once you're old enough to suck a dick, that is!

Millie feels her body stiffen as they compare fellatio and cunnilingus, being proficient in one or both. Prim, she feels tiredly, or prudish—or simply tedious: that she is being tedious, but finding them tedious too.

Outside the sky has turned a strange turquoise before the dark.

What time does Adam get home? they ask. And how is he going? Is he the raddest dad?

Millie begins a spiel, without meaning to go on so much: how Adam leaves by eight most mornings, though his first classes aren't until the later morning; *I need some time to clear*

my head, to get into the right space, he explains, and this seems fair, though she resents him, nonetheless—just about despises him on some mornings as he heads out the door.

Other times these feelings surface when she is woken in the night for the baby's feeds and changes, and somehow, inexplicably, Adam sleeps through—or he sleeps in the spare room, the nights before a teaching day.

She tries to explain this to Ella and Em, and sees them share eye contact across the room. Then, in unison, they are emphatic: It's not the same though, mate, they remind her. I know it's hard, but going to work on no sleep is *so much harder* than if you're just staying home and get to rest with the baby.

Sure, Millie says, chastened. I know that really, it's just this feeling—

Other times it is something she observes without emotion. It is the same in thinking about the classes she would be teaching, and who might be taking them this term, in lieu of her—the knowledge of her expendability is comfortingly unaffecting.

She imagines Adam drinking barista-made coffee in the mornings; checking emails at his laptop in the dappled light at one of the café tables outside the library, the leaves over his head electric green, filled vividly with sun.

The trees she can bring to mind visually but not by name—she would have known, before, what they are called.

She and Adam met on-campus, teaching in the same department but different disciplines: Adam teaches classes in history, though to her shame now she can't remember the which or when—where in time or space his focus is at the moment. Sometimes she imagines trying to teach now, too—the undergraduate lectures and seminars she used to give on genre, and on storytelling and identity, or on fairy tales of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries—but reaching for language sometimes there is an openness, a lacuna—a fatigued, empty pause.

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Her friends have not been gone for long, could only have reached the highway at most, when the text arrives on Millie's phone screen: *Are you actually okay? You were so tense and seem so unhappy and on edge, just not like yourself at all. We can't stop talking about it. It's like, we had to be really careful about what we said, and you made everything we said about you when it wasn't?*

Then, a second message: *We don't want to upset you, just worried!* ♥♥♥

Millie holds Figgy on the couch, against to her chest, feeling like such a drip with the tears that dribble from her cheeks across the backs of her hands and wrists. She has typed *I'm sorry* and then *I wish you'd cut me a break*, but doesn't send any reply.

When Adam gets home she will hand him the swaddled baby—whether serene in sleep or desolate and wailing—and step wordlessly out onto the porch, the dark bricks freezing even through her thick house socks. She'll stand in the wood-smoked air, under the rustling leaves of the ivy—the baby's name, in fact, is Ivy—then go further still, stepping out of her body and beyond, out, up, into the sweep of icy stars, the ceaseless night.