

When Em left home Leamy hid behind the curtain. Watched. Boxes piled up and the desk with its legs poking into the sky. Lashes of rope to keep everything from falling on the road, bumps and stones.

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Reading in the kitchen so long it gets dark, her mum has to bend into the words to stop them from fading. Stories of men and women in love. Nice men and women, who speak properly to each other and always say the right thing. Men who have jobs with good names, and who open doors and buy flowers.

In the backyard, there's the pool their dad built without a hole to drain it. Leaves get in, then slime, dirt. And at last, water bugs that grow from nothing. Black rubbery things that get hard backs and bite you when you stick your finger near. They go round and round in circles, and tilt themselves to drink the air. Underneath, in their cloudy world, never leaving the pool.

Large moon makes the room glow bright. And Leamy knows her dad's coming home.

He'll be back any day, and their mum knows it too. She washes the lounge-room curtains. A storm of grey in the laundry sink. Rings of dirt that take weeks to fade. The curtains blow wild on the line, suddenly light. She loops them back on rods and stands back to see. Material that lets in bits of sun through the parts washed clean, and at the ends, the window somehow grown bigger while the curtains had gone.

And then her dad returns.

He tells her of places where there's nothing but sky. Flat earth, the air. Brings her tales of houses on sticks and men with spears. Dogs eaten by giant flies. And there's an emu egg he brings home in his bag and Leamy puts on her dressing-table. Until it turns 102 degrees one day, and the shell explodes to paint the wall brown. *(pages 28-29)*

Their mum goes strange now. She can't remember where she put her brush. And she makes cups of tea, and then forgets they're there. She goes out to the fence, and comes back in. Walks across the kitchen floor, and back again. Shakes when she turns the tap at the sink. And goes back to her room.

Leamy lying flat under her bed, staring into the rusty springs.

Em draws boxes, and writes in her diary. Goes out to the kitchen to cook vegetables and sausages for her and Leamy, and holds herself tight so she doesn't say anything bad to their mum.

Their mum not dressing herself properly. Days go by, and she lies in bed at night in her clothes. Puts another layer over the top in the morning. Doesn't sleep. Her eyes are red and glassy. The black dots inside them have gone small. She starts swaying back and forward in her kitchen chair. Lighting cigarette after cigarette, and never eating a thing.

Em, at last, going to the phone and calling the hospital she knows the number of from other times. Asking them please to do something, please to come...

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Leamy goes to the river. Tracks with walls of thistles. And the river is brown and running on. Sticks beside it you paint your name with.

She skips stones. Throws her voice into the cave and it comes back to her before she can block her ears. Runs across trees fallen shallow in water and hides behind boulders scarred deep with words.

And the river is sky and water inside. Sound and feel you can take inside yourself to make you wet and alive. And a thing that can drown you if you let it. Stop you living, as well.

Leamy squatting by the river and tilting her head to see. Worlds go by underneath its surface.

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At the tip, they roam up and down hills that slide to show dolls' heads poking out and bits of shoes. Find a lampshade Milkda can dust and call a hat. And a box Leamy can set as a table. Crates, newspapers, an old bath-mat. Soon they have a whole lounge-room. 'Pass my smoking jacket, Mavis,' Milkda says. And Leamy gives her the curtain they found at the bottom of a box. They sit smoking twigs until the sun falls down, and it's time to turn in.

The walls of Milkda's room are cardboard. So thin you can hear the thistles, bending in the wind, outside.

They're gluing wings on metal fish, Leamy and Milkda. Making them magic with showers of glittery stuff. Later they get back to Leamy's place along the cracks in the footpath. Walking slow and their steps almost perfect together. Inside her bedroom, Leamy takes Em's box of wood. Opens its lid. Em's letters. A page of inked squares linked in chains. A bent paper-clip. She lifts the beads of colour and loops them over Milkda's neck. Runs her hand over their rocky edges, and doesn't look up.

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