Jess came to the island on the back of a bird. She ran her fingers along its beak, wrapped her legs around its neck, buried her face in the small soft feathers by its eyes. Through the night they swung to the left and the right, floated across the sky, cut gashes in the clouds. And as they flew, she looked for Billy.

With kicks and coos she urged the bird on, gripped its inky feathers until her hands were slick with grease.

Barefoot, she landed on the sand. The surf rushed to meet her. Its foamy tendrils gathered about her ankles and groped at her calves. The water rose around each leg, swallowed her skin, coated her in salt. Her dress fluttered as the water rose. The waves whipped around her torso, binding her arms to her sides as the water rose and rose.

Up came the water, up over her head, pulling her hair in all directions. The ocean enveloped her and she watched as the surface floated away. The moon was nothing but a sliver and she didn't miss it when it was gone.

The bird wheeled in circles in the sky above, calling out her name. With a scream it tucked up its wings and dived straight down. Its sharp beak broke through the waves and she saw its huge yellow eye—roving, mad—from where she stood, encased at the bottom of the sea. She watched it blink, saw a bloody tear roll across the ebony contours of its skull, and turned her head when it called her name. It called again and again; it shrieked and thrashed, its eyes bleeding tears, its feet cracking at the joints.

Please be quiet.

But it was too late. The shadows gathered in a circle above her head. They spun around and around, whipping up a whirlpool. The bird was sucked down through the water and into the open mouths of the waiting sharks. The sounds of bones breaking and feathers tearing filled the ocean and Jess covered her ears, closed her eyes tight. The feathers fell in a cascade. They caught in her
hair and brushed against her cheeks. She slipped on their greasy planes as she walked away.

Still, the water rose.

She walked along the ocean floor, her hair and her dress free about her body. The water was her breath, the current, her lungs. A hazy line marked a ridge in the sand ahead. Beyond, more sharks. They cruised on patrol, steady, the size of navy submarines. They numbered in the thousands in their grey suits and tiger stripes, sharks with hammers and screwdrivers stuck to their faces. Their chatter was deafening.

As she realised where she was, Jess gasped. Her hand shook as it rose to her mouth. She pressed her pointer finger to her lower lip and bit her nail.

The drop-off.

She ran toward it; she pumped her arms and swung her legs, used her toes to lever off the sand. She ran straight, frustratingly slow, afraid of jumping too high, of spinning out into space, of piercing through the metres and breaking back into the other world, above.

She covered the distance quickly. She found the ledge as she had left it. The diving weights were there, both sets, twisted together in a heap, and the imprint of her hand—made after the accident—was pressed into the sand, near her toes. It fitted perfectly when she bent to test its match.

She looked around her. The ocean was dark; she could just make out the backs of the animals, their skins glinting as they slid through the water. She sat on the ledge, rubbed her hands on her arms, tried to get warm. She cupped her hands to her mouth to catch the heat of her breath. There was nothing.

Where are you? I told you I’d be here.

Darkness pressed in from all angles. The mass of the water thickened, weighed on her skin. Faces formed against the wavering darkness. They loomed above her, hid behind her ears, swam through her throat and ate her whole. She coughed and sneezed and they disappeared.

As the sun rose in the world above the water, the fish came back to watch her in shifts. Occasionally a shark would swim beneath her feet and run its back along her toes. She tickled its crevices and patted its eyes. The muscles in her thighs ached and the arches of her feet cramped with cold. Still, she waited for Billy to
come back.

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"I don’t want to wait for you forever," Jess said into the space. "Don’t leave me here again. You left me—you made me watch—so you owe me this one last thing. Where are you? Why won’t you come?"

"Tell me Jess, how would it be?" She jumped when she heard his voice.

"Billy? Where are you?"

"Don’t think. Just talk."

She shook her hair. Five or so shrimp quivered in the water as they fell from the folds of her locks.

"Okay," she said nervously, "it would be like this. I’d see you, off in the distance, and you’d see me here, sitting and waiting. You’d walk toward me—slowly—and as you did, I’d see you more clearly, not as a haze or a ghost but as you were. You’d be real with me."

She looked into the distance as she spoke. The water flickered as a figure formed in silhouette.

"Is that you?"

"Keep talking," the voice whispered in her right ear.

"Well, you’d walk towards me and I’d stand to face you. I’d be whole and you’d be whole and you’d smile. I’d touch you. I’d feel your skin under my skin."

As she said the words her fingers flexed on something solid. She saw his tanned, speckled forearms; saw the scar on his left thumb. Through the water, she felt his warmth.

"Keep talking." Billy’s face smiled at her.

She swallowed and shook.

"I’d trace the bones of your wrist, follow the ropes of your veins, feel the pulsing of your blood under my fingers. Then I’d lay my hand flat on your chest. You’d cover it with your hand"—and as she said the words, he did—"and
you'd leave your hand there, to let the heat build.

"You'd circle my waist with your arm and pull me in close—so close our noses touched, so your eyelids touched my cheek. That's what you'd do. There'd be a rush of breath at my mouth"—and there was—"and I'd feel you breathe, feel your heart. And then I'd know what it is I needed to do to keep you."

He gathered her up, held her, rocked her with the swell. Her hair wrapped around their bodies and hid their skin from all the eyes watching through the water. In the place that was no place, they vanished together, for the length of a night.

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"How do I make everything better?" Jess asked.

"You mean you don't know?" Billy replied.

"No of course I don't know. That's why I'm waiting for you. You're supposed to tell me."

"Perhaps you're asking the wrong question." Billy played with the hem of Jess's dress. The sun shone from the world above and all the animals in the ocean sparkled in the light.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that," he said. "Nothing else."

"Talk normally!"

"I am. You're asking the wrong question. When you know the question, you'll have your answer."

"Billy?"

"Yes?"

"What's it like to drown? Billy, did you hear me?"

He spoke as if from a distance. "Yes I heard you."

"Tell me. I want to know what it feels like to drown."
“I can’t, Jess…”

“Tell me, please.”

“I don’t know what it’s like, because I didn’t drown.”

“You’re angry with me. How can you be angry with me?”

“I’m not.” His eyes were circled and smudged with grey. “This is not the right question. Please drop it, my darling.”

“You’ve never called me that before.” She turned to look out past the drop-off. In the cloudy distance an octopus as big as a house raised a tentacle and waved at her. She lifted a finger in reply.

“I just want to know,” she mumbled under her breath. “I mean, were you scared? I didn’t see you die, so there’s no way I can know.”

“Of course I was scared—I was terrified. But I don’t see how this can help you.”

“I’m just trying to understand. These are the things I think about. These are the questions I want you to answer. But you’re not around any more.”

“Do me one favour?”

“Of course.”

“Ask me a question that will help you,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ll answer anything you ask me,” Billy said. “Anything. But there’s only one question that will help. Until you ask it, you’re only going to hurt yourself.”

“Was it painful?”

Something in his face softened. “It wasn’t that bad, in the end.”

She resisted the urge to push him further. He looked spent.

“Cold soup,” he said eventually.

“Sorry?”
"Drowning. It's like breathing cold soup. Is that what you want? Is that why you're here? Do you want to drown?"

"No! I want you to live. How can I make you breathe again?"

He shook his head. "That's not the right question. But what about you? What are you doing here? You shouldn't be here, and I think you know that."

"Don't you miss me?"

He lifted her chin to meet his eyes. "Of course I do."

"Then you should know already," she said. "This is where you died. That's why I'm here. This is the only place I know to look for you."

Billy clasped his hands between his knees. "Where exactly are we? Tell me," he said, looking at his feet.

"We're at fifteen metres. Don't you remember? This is where you died," she said again, forcefully.

"In a manner of speaking, yes, I suppose you're right."

"What do you mean, 'in a manner of speaking'?"

"Think about it," he said as he looked past her, gesturing with his hand. "This isn't a place. We're at fifteen metres below the ocean's surface, sure. It's a measurement—if you draw a line from here to the air, there are fifteen metres of water above us. But what does that mean? If we're taking that as a location, as a place, we could be anywhere really."

He stood and brushed his legs.

"And yes, I notice we're at the drop-off," he continued. "But the sand has shifted. The water is different. The shark—the one you're looking for, the one you dream about—he's long gone. There's this ledge, sure, but its place in the water is always shifting. The moon, the waves, they pull the 'place' of my death around the globe all the time, every second of the day. You can't come and find me here. This place doesn't exist."

"Then why are you here?"

He held out his hand to help her stand. "Because you called me here. I'll be
with you whenever you call me, wherever you are. I’ll always find you. You just need to remember.”

“Remember?” she said, struggling to her feet.

“You just need to remember me. Let’s walk.”

“So how did you die?”

“Ah... my darling Jess. Yes, yes. Now you’re getting close. You already know how I died.”

“An aneurysm...”

“Correct.”

“Could I have stopped it? If we hadn't gone diving that day—if we hadn't gone to the island at all—could I have stopped it?”

“No.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to.”

“Since when have you been so wise?”

“Since when have you been able to breathe underwater?”

“Touché.”

She looped her arm through his and pulled him close. They walked barefoot across the sand toward the seagrass plains where dugongs and turtles grazed.

“Careful,” he said. “Watch out for the starfish.”

“You remember Tangalooma?” she asked.

“How could I forget,” he smirked. “So sexy. You in the dark, all slippery and sly. You were my little sea urchin, always too brave for your own good, always a little mischievous. Always game. I knew I loved you at Tangalooma that night.”
NICOLE HOLYER, An Indifferent Angel

Her smile was wan as she remembered. "I know," she said. "Sometimes, at the farm, I'd crawl under my bed and pretend I was back there. Under the bed it was dark and cool and sometimes, I swear, I brought you back. I'd spread out my arms and I'd touch your fingers. I'd feel them brushing against my nails. How awful is that? That was the closest I could get to you. Your damn nails."

"Is that why you hid the angel there?"

She stopped in her tracks. "How did you know?"

"I know everything," he said. "Always have."

Her laughter cracked through the water. She held her belly until she cried. "How can I miss you when you're right here?"

The fish following at her back dispersed in panic, flicking the sand in a cloud and for a moment, his face was obscured in the dirty water.

"We're rising," she said.

"That's right. You didn't expect to stay here forever, did you?"

"I hadn't thought about it. What happens when we reach the surface?"

"Then it's time for me to go."

"How long do we have?"

"Not long."

"I'll take you with me when we surface. You'll see—you'll breathe again and I'll take you with me."

"Ask me about the angel. You haven't asked me about that yet."

"Okay Billy, why did you have an angel in your bag on Moreton Island?"

"I'm so glad you asked."

"Ouch!" Jess grabbed her foot.

"I told you they were sharp. The angel," he said, lifting Jess into his arms, "was supposed to be a surprise. Did I ever tell you about Cherub's Cave?"
“Not really. I looked it up on the Internet after you died. It looks really pretty.”

A hundred metres ahead, Jess could make out the soft grey shells of a school of dugongs bobbing across the ocean floor. She pointed at one of the larger mammals. “Take me closer?” she asked, stalling. She could see the surface rippling in the sun, just a few metres above their heads.

Billy nodded and carried her to its side. “Did you read why it was called Cherub’s Cave?” he asked softly.

She ran her hand across the slippery surface of the dugong’s body, and it nuzzled her hand, its whiskers rough and busy, looking for food.

“I read it on the Internet. Something to do with a missing figurine,” she said. “There was a cement angel at the entrance of the cave. Divers used to touch it when they passed through the caves. It was a good omen, a lucky charm. But it’s not there any more. No one knows what happened to it. Oh no. No that wasn’t…”

Billy put Jess gently on the sand and pulled an ornament from his pocket. “Do you remember this?” he asked.

“How do you have that?” She grabbed it, examined its little lips, its perfect fingers and the smooth contour of its belly. It was whole, undamaged. “I thought I’d smashed it.”

“No, you didn’t. You just dreamt that you did.” He searched her face. “I took it, Jess.”

Her hands fell to her sides and the angel dropped to the sand with a dull thud. “What do you mean you took it?”

“I stole it. I went diving there a few years ago, before it happened; I found it half buried in sand. I knew what it was, where it belonged, but I took it anyway.”

“But you said you’d never been to Cherub’s Cave before.”

He shrugged. “I lied. I’m sorry.”

She kneeled and scooped the figurine from the sand. “So that’s why you needed to go back.”

He nodded.
“Is that why you died?”

“No, I don’t think so. I was always going to die, Jess. I told you this already.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“You’ll see.” He took her hand and led her forward. “Jess, would you do something for me?” he asked.

“Anything.”

“Create us a life. Tell me how we’d live if we had left the island.” He spoke the words to the sand, wouldn’t look at her face.

“Well,” she said, “we’d go to Cherub’s Cave, like we planned.”

“That’s easy. What else?”

“We’d live in your house. We’d go sailing on the bay, from Redcliffe, and we’d travel. I’d take you to Europe, show you London. You’d ask me to marry you,” she blushed, “and I’d say yes. We’d have a beautiful wedding, up at Mooloolaba, on the beach where you took me that day. I’d wear a white dress with no shoes. I’d help you build your business, and I’d write my books, and we’d go swimming every weekend.”

“Kids. What about kids?”

“I hadn’t really thought about that,” she lied.

“I’d like kids.”

A pod of dolphins joined them in the water. They rippled through the short metres to the surface, breaking through to jump in the surf, in the sunlight. Jess recognised one of the calves from Tangalooma.

“We’d have a little girl,” she said, squeezing Billy’s hand. “She’d be a water baby, just like you.”

They trudged across the ocean floor in silence, rising through the water as they walked. Billy guided Jess around the tip of the island before doubling back, parallel to the east coast.
“Look,” Billy said, pointing. “We’re here.”

Jess had to duck to keep from hitting her head on the surface of the ocean. The churn of whitewash made it difficult to hear him speak.

“Where are we?” she mouthed, her face lit bright by the midday sun.

He smiled his best smile—with his eyes, with his mouth, with all the little wrinkles and dimples that composed his face—and she was calm, even as he began to sink away from her.

“We’re here,” he said. “We’re at Cherub’s Cave.”

Below, a stingray arced in a graceful swoop; it swung through the sun streams and the thick ribbons of kelp that cut the water into wilted columns. Mackerel and trevally swam in silver packs. Beyond the kelp, a grouper patrolled the opening of the cave. Jess watched the dugongs and the dolphins and the grey nurse sharks swim together, happy together, cruising the waters silently through their perfect world. She wanted to stay.

“It’s perfect,” she said as the wind bit at her shoulder blades. “Billy, hold my hand,” she shouted. “I can’t stop rising.” She rolled in a ball, rested her chin on her knees and tried to sink back into the water. He shook his head once, squeezed her hand once, then let it go.

“I can’t, Jess. I have to take this back,” he said, cradling the angel in the crook of his arm. “I found it in a place it doesn’t belong.”

“Wait!” she cried. “I want to come with you.”

“You can’t, Jess. You don’t belong here.”

She wriggled and squirmed and lay flat on her belly. She tried to kick down through the water, but was lifted, every time, and thrown back at the surface.

“I don’t want you to go,” she said.

“It’s okay, Jess, I won’t be far away.” He sank to the bottom of the ocean as she lay on its surface. She watched as he walked across the sand, stepping over a wobbegong shark lying by the entrance of the cave.

“Billy,” she sobbed, “why did you die?”
He placed the angel on a ledge at the cave’s entrance and turned to her, his body slack with relief. He looked so small in the water, so many metres from where she hung. He was beginning to fade—his hair was no longer bright, his face grey, his shoulders pale and fine.

“That’s the right question, darling Jess. You already know the answer. It was inevitable.”

He smiled his last smile before he ducked down and swam into the cave. She watched his naked feet disappear into the space between the granite, out of her view. There were no bubbles.

She kicked and tried to duck dive down. It was useless. Every time, she was ripped back to the surface, where the sun shone warmly on her skin.

She waited an age, suspended, her arms and legs spread, her shadow throwing a star over the angel’s face.

In time she stood and left the water, and the sun burned brightly on her face.

And as she walked back to the island, the angel watched her, mute and indifferent.