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Who Kissed my Posy Rash?

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Abstract
We were women with very white teeth. One day Beatrice said it was as if we'd been cleaning them with small burnt twigs in Africa or in Katherine, since childhood. Really it was because it was a blistering Sydney summer and though we wore hats and creams, the sun and the wine burnt us all except for Pepe Botero, the Mexican who said he was a writer. Our teeth were white, our skins only imperceptibly older unless you suddenly saw someone or yourself in Lena's mirrors, in afternoon light. Beatrice had bought the terrace next door when I was away but I met her dog first. On certain hot nights the Great Dane would somehow find his way across the roof and poke his head into my bedroom window. From the first night, despite the dog's size, the effect was comical not frightening. The registration tag told me his name was Lace. And I imagined then that she must be romantic, my new neighbour, whose dresses I had been watching on the line, whose dog's black coat was full of torn white threads that made you think of fine point serviettes in a grandmother's bottom drawer or the laceiness of the sea at night after a big wave has broken.
We were women with very white teeth. One day Beatrice said it was as if we’d been cleaning them with small burnt twigs in Africa or in Katherine, since childhood. Really it was because it was a blistering Sydney summer and though we wore hats and creams, the sun and the wine burnt us all except for Pepe Botero, the Mexican who said he was a writer. Our teeth were white, our skins only imperceptibly older unless you suddenly saw someone or yourself in Lena’s mirrors, in afternoon light. Beatrice had bought the terrace next door when I was away but I met her dog first. On certain hot nights the Great Dane would somehow find his way across the roof and poke his head into my bedroom window. From the first night, despite the dog’s size, the effect was comical not frightening. The registration tag told me his name was Lace. And I imagined then that she must be romantic, my new neighbour, whose dresses I had been watching on the line, whose dog’s black coat was full of torn white threads that made you think of fine point serviettes in a grandmother’s bottom drawer or the laceiness of the sea at night after a big wave has broken.

I was just back from nearly a year away and sat at my window imagining whimsical and innocent pastimes. Perhaps my new neighbour was a cross-dressing boy who would entertain me endlessly with stories of his romances, I thought. Or maybe I’d become good at sketching street pigeons flirting and fucking under my tamarisk tree. But I’d come home the month before Christmas and already, before I’d met Beatrice, there seemed to be a momentum to the parties and a convergence of the same people.

Each morning at about nine o’clock, a wind would knock over the screen I’d brought home. It was far too fragile for the strength of an Australian summer and whereas in Europe it had cut out the midwinter light and unleashed the tongues of people sleeping in my room on the other side of it, here the screen was almost transparent. No one could be hidden behind it, let alone feel safe enough to tell any of their secrets. The morning winds preceded brief storms and instead of pigeons or dogs or commencing the sketches for Eva, I drew the rain wetting the sundresses of my new and unseen neighbour. I drew the dresses the same miniature size as cut-out costumes from childhood. Cutting out the dresses was a pleasant task to nurse away the mild hangovers which I persuaded myself
were as much to do with my eyes adjusting to the blast of Australian
colours, as alcohol. I couldn't get used to Australia. Australian voices
again. And air so rich it felt to me that it or I would begin to rot out from
our edges. My sweat seemed to smell of grass.
‘Even the mangoes have sunburn,’ I said to Lena, my voice full of dis-
belief. ‘The colours. Like I've woken up in Kindergarten. And this elbow!
So burnt after yesterday’s drive to South Head.’
‘Your skin will adjust soon,’ she said and cut another piece of mango
into a grid for me. ‘Soon, you’ll notice nothing.’ She put a piece of mango
onto the bone of my elbow with her tongue. ‘You were like this last time
you came back from London.’

Beyond the line of Beatrice’s dresses four children pushed their dog up
the steps of the slippery dip at the park and sent him down. Lena was
moving the yellow square of fruit in small circles inside my elbow but it
was no use. I felt more care for the dog on the hot slippery dip. Lena’s
sweat also smelt of grass and I wanted to ask why she was bothering with
what had after all died between us before I went away.
‘Sorry to be so obvious, but once you start working again, you’ll feel like
you were never anywhere else except Riley
Street.’ Lena suddenly stopped
trying to make love and picked up five of my paper cut-outs instead. She
dressed them on each finger of her left hand. We tried to remember the
last real dresses we’d ever worn. I thought it was when I was still married
and had had to accompany him to a garden party in London. It was pink
and ankle-length and made me look like I should’ve been selling ice
creams to the tourists outside the black and gold-gilt gates. Lena couldn’t
remember her last dress. She dipped one of the paper finger dresses into
her glass of water. For a moment I watched as the dress clung as real
cloth would to my girlfriend’s finger.

My table began to seem too round for us to do anything constructive.
We couldn’t be comfortable. Lena had asked me to help with the design
of her Christmas Street party invitation. We moved everything to the next
seat and then round again, or pulled the curtains back even further along
the rail, expecting at any moment for my neighbour to come rushing out
to bring in her dresses from the storm.

‘Are you going to invite her,’ I asked.
‘Of course. Silly.’

We were already a bit repulsed by each other. I wished Lena would put
on a t-shirt so that I didn’t have to observe her swollen veins.

There’s no smell quite as reassuring as freshly sharpened pencils. I find
that to have my box of Derwents open comforts me more than any other
thing. Lace sits on my feet under the table. Sometimes I chide him: you
shouldn’t have trusted him darling, and the regret in my voice makes me
cry all over again, for I’d also placed at least a kind of trust in Pepe
Botero. Two weeks before Beatrice died he pushed me into a dark room
to try to frighten and kiss me. Everything might’ve happened differently if only I’d told her about this. His tongue seemed to belong to an animal seeking a secret breeding place in my throat.

As planned we first met Beatrice at the Christmas Street party. For the invitation Lena had taken a photograph of local graffiti which said No laughing, do not Frolic. Very droll, very wonderful, very Lena-esque, people said, kissing her. So that before it was dark she appeared to have been purposely seeking the kisses of women wearing only the gaudiest shades of lipstick. But the party also had a sense of a family Christmas in that many of the people in Riley Street knew each other. There were picnic rugs and trestles in front of the canal and quite a few children much older already than I remembered. Beatrice arrived at a moment when the sky was so mauve it could’ve been Paris. The big dog progressed in loops around her. It was impossible not to notice and the entire party seemed to pause and watch. She was taller than I’d imagined, darker and there was something almost military in the way she held her head. Yet if you had to describe her to a perfect stranger you would’ve had to use words applicable to her dresses – flimsy, vulnerable. The type of woman I thought, who’d always have many mysterious garments, too delicate for the sun, drying in her bathroom. Her neck was long but her face reminded me of a Paula Becker painting of a girl. A translucent quality. I thought she was about thirty but Lena told me later her true age of forty three. The other thing I noticed immediately, once Lena had introduced us, was how sad Beatrice’s eyes were and how flecked, as if for elaborate camouflage in a yellow and green forest. So that even though we were laughing within the first few seconds of having met – over my story of her dog’s late-night forays to my bedroom window – and leaning down together to pat Lace, my overwhelming impression was of sadness.

“She’s truly the worst watchdog in the world,’ Beatrice said. My only chance would be that Lace lick them to their death. Wouldn’t it Lovely?’ Putting her small hand with its small fingers onto the dog’s gigantic face.

I also noticed that Beatrice was looking at Lena’s forearms, which were very hairy and strange against the sleekness of the dog’s coat. Later, during the downpour, when everyone ran for cover under the viaduct and we were all a little bit drunker, Beatrice whispered that she found the hairiness of Lena’s wrists very enticing. She surprised me, putting her hand towards my breasts. ‘Look,’ she said. From running, beaujolais had sprayed my shirt with the shape of a delicate pink fan.

I told Beatrice I’d never really liked the hairiness of my lover’s arms to which she replied she’d always loved such small aberrations in hers.

Although from the first I had the feeling Beatrice had had some lesbian experience, the man who became her lover didn’t arrive at the Christmas Street party until much later in the night. His teeth were brown with a grey band through the middle of them. You can’t condemn a man for that;
I remember defending Pepe Botero's teeth and other things to Lena, but she said he made her feel slightly sullied. Whether it was his teeth or his eyes, or his lies about publication in eminent overseas literary journals, Lena wasn't sure.

Though I secretly agreed with Lena, I went on to tell her the story about the brown scars running in his eyes. When Pepe Botero was eleven years old a wild Mexican pony bolted with him through a barbed wire fence, strung at that height to stop paupers stealing lemons from his mother's orchard. During the following time of blindness, when he had to wear gauze guards over his eyes, Pepe began to learn the shreds of other languages known to his mother. She would brush his hair until blue sparks flew out of its ends, speaking all the while to him first in this language, then in that. To begin with their lessons concentrated on making up sentences about the pony gelding who still roamed at will in the orchard, eating up the fruit. His mother would use the terrible swear words of foreign languages to describe the pony. Or muddle them together. What a dangerous boy slut the pony was, she told Pepe. But at other times she'd make fairytales up about another quite magical little horse who ate only oranges and lemons and then slaked his thirst on buckets full of homemade lemonade. It was only because the lazy maid had made half the normal quantity of lemonade one afternoon, that the pony's wings failed to grow properly. So that instead of the pony and his boy clearing the fence around their palace, they crashed.

One day when Pepe asked why it was they hadn't killed or sold the real pony that had nearly blinded him, his mother replied that an extra gardener would have then had to be employed. Such levels the windfall fruit would quickly reach, a man could spend half a day, wheeling it away in a barrow. She ran her fingers through her son's long hair and tugged at it until he said ouch. Where else, she asked him, would they find such a little horse who genuinely liked to eat mouldy fruit. And what could Pepe Botero expect but to be hurt if he ever again tried to jump onto a sleeping unbroken pony's back?

When it occurred to him to say but Mama why didn't they give the fruit to the poor people who sometimes tried to climb into the orchard on the dark nights before new moon, his mother said that it was only old alcoholics who were after the lemons. To flavour their methylated spirits or whatever other concoctions they might have made out of the boot polish stolen from hard working shoe shine boys. Or the sugar-cane sticks thieved from the oldest women at the markets.

According to Beatrice, it was at this early age that Pepe became a socialist, eventually to be disinherited by his wealthy parents. She told us this as if we must love him too, for his political ideology if not himself. As a twelve year old he had given away a whole box full of pink marzipan piglets to a dusty beggar, knowing that when he told his mother she would have his father whip him with the belt full of lucky silver horseshoes.
'He's so full of bulldust,' said Lena, 'that even if you tapped him with your little finger out it would all belch.' Pepe Botero reminded us of an engraving at the large and showy Face exhibition Julia Mento had curated to such complex acclaim. In the engraving the man's face was halfway through its transformation into an alligator. We went all together but Beatrice and Pepe travelled around the show separately from us, so that often it felt to Lena and I that we were being as secretly attentive to their affectionate indiscretions, as to the hangings. 'What I keep thinking,' Lena said, 'is all that hair when they're in bed.' I too had thought that, I admitted and Beatrice's laughter, even though she didn't know what we were laughing about, was as sumptuous as the gallery. I thought it sounded like fruit being unpeeled in one long lovely curl and held Lena's little finger in my own. I thought of the inappropriate memories Beatrice was prone to telling me: about the shape of her mother's lips dripping down through a fringe of pubic hair: how long and ragged and mauve. Quite unattractive compared, Beatrice said, to the neat shape and pinkness she'd been blessed with. She said things like this to me. Or would return again and again to the memory of climaxing with kittens on her clitoris; how no orgasm had ever been quite so sweet. Then there was a day in later adolescence, when she pushed the tip of her paintbrush into her siamese's vulva and gave an orgasm back. 'Even now, when I see a kitten,' she confessed during one of these conversations in my kitchen, 'I think of that almost fake feel of cat fur on my own little twelve year old body.'

I could only think of some pale, subtle European detail in exchange: how the skylights of Laon smelt of the folds of the freshly washed sex of a mature woman.

Only at one point at the exhibition was Beatrice able to stand alone in front of a picture. This was a kind of illuminated perspex screen of a mare's face, life size, half from the side. Lights shone through the horses eyes. The artist had also let light stream down one line of long jaw bone. The overall effect was quite eerie and beautiful. 'We might be standing in front of the Demeter horse goddess, mightn't we?' Beatrice said, when we came up to her. 'Or the goose girl's talking horse who lost his life. O du Falada da du hangest...'. So that I hung my own head for a moment to remember a girl from a long time ago slipping her hands under my white horse's neck to say oh the sad, dark smell of horses. So that I tried to kiss her better, putting the horse's shoulder between us and the wind off the river. And Beatrice told us for the first time that her father was a NSW government tickie. All through her childhood, she said, shambolic extra racehorses had roamed around the paddocks of their farm near Green Pigeon, because her father couldn't bear to see horses who'd once been the finest and glossiest going through the tickgates in expensive horse floats,
going to the abattoirs. 'I'm sure you and my Dad would really get on,' she said to me.

'Why?'

'I just know. He is such an old sweetheart. The same kind of kindness that you have.'

Lena snorted.

Pepe came back from having a drink from the steel refrigerated bubbler in the corner. He put his face underneath Beatrice's dark pony tail until his cold red lips just touched the back of her neck. He said something to her in some other language. Lena thought he said, Je t'adore, but I argued it had been something far lewder in a language unknown.

In the lift, he undid his ponytail and began to conduct an invisible orchestra. This wasn't very funny but we laughed because we liked Beatrice. He continued conducting long after the laughter could go on and Beatrice alleviated the awkwardness by fixing up her face and taking the attention from him. She took out her lipstick and used the lift mirror. She knew, she apologised, that the lipstick she wore was very red, because children on public transport always stared at her mouth. I didn’t know Beatrice very well at that point but felt already the familiar feeling of a summer flirt beginning between us. There was just that certain feeling that Beatrice had had at least one woman lover. Pepe held the lift door open with his body while Lena tried Beatrice’s lipstick.

'Oh look at my wine rash,' I groaned, seeing under the lift-light all the broken blood vessels on my cheeks. 'I look like I have the pox.'

'No, it's posy,' said Beatrice.

'Poxy.' I made a face at myself.

Lena kissed the mirror. Beatrice kissed Pepe who was immediately worried that she'd left lipstick on the skin around his mouth. 'As if I'd do that to you dahlink,' said Beatrice.

'Isn't she bewtifool. A bewtifool personne,' and he held the inside of her wrist out to us, as if it was a long stemmed, cut freesia for us to appreciate.

The power any reasonably intelligent but monolingual Australian gives to people who speak more than one language, with at least an air of fluency, was never more apparent than this summer. Even Lena, who unfailingly called him Pea Beau in a conscious mockery of Beatrice calling him PB or Peps, was half taken in. And no matter how precarious or jealous Pepe's moods grew, Beatrice was able to cite his intelligence and sensitivity, with no proof other than that he said he possessed seven languages. He was meant to have honed his French and his socialism at the Sorbonne but couldn’t remember the name of the street the university ran alongside.

Although he was this unconvincing, Lena asked me one day had I noticed how we'd all begun to talk a peculiar kind of broken English around him. Fractured voice patterns and the misuse of ordinary verbs had become our way of putting him at ease. For instance if something amusing
happened we’d say – And it is making me laughing – as if butchering our sentences was the equivalent of speaking in a voice more exotic than our own Australian ones. On the night he phoned at 2am to tell me he and Beatrice had had a terrible fight, I heard my own voice like some kind of French, tin monkey wind-up, saying oh non, non, non. As if it were inconceivable, as if at the sound of his voice I had learnt to assume another one, even at a moment of crisis.

She was in the bathroom, with the taps on so that it sounded like a suicide not a murder. She’d managed to lock herself away from him. Or maybe he fled. Then she crawled. When he came back and phoned me, she was paradoxically safe from him but not from herself. She’d bitten his lip and possibly punched him twice. ‘Look,’ he said. ‘Why she do this to me? Last night she was horrible.’

I stood beside him wheedling with an accent that wasn’t my own, at the locked door. The hiss of the bath and the shower running at once. The look of her teeth marks on his mouth where he said she’d bitten him. Before I called the police, before he left the house, scared there would be problems regarding his expired visa, I asked had he finished with the Thomas Bernhardt stories I’d lent him, as if I knew I wouldn’t see him again. I had purchased a poor translation, he said and handed me the stories from his satchel. We did this at the front door, perhaps at the actual moment that she died.

I think it’s possible to believe that what lead to Beatrice’s death, as much as the pills she swallowed after the bashing she received, was her own desire for something more exotic than Australia. I think her father might understand this explanation in that he first instilled it. In between spraying horses and manning the tickgates, all Beatrice’s father would do was read. Other tickies gardened or drank or learnt how to crochet but he read French classics and Hemingway. Beatrice would never forget his joy, she said, if ever he came across a horse person or a cattle truck driver who shared the same reading passion. When I met him in the bar of the Southern Cross on Broadway where country people stayed, Beatrice’s father cried like a young man. So that his hair seemed like the costume shop from across the road had placed an incongruous nest of white hair above his almost unlined, olive skinned face. And what am I to say to him, I keep wondering, what can I tell, when he comes to see me this afternoon, when he catches the 426, 422 or 423 as I told him to and walks down Riley Street as we arranged yesterday he would do.

How was it, he asked me sipping his beer, that his daughter, had let a lunatic from Mexico do that to her. When in only another three days she’d promised him she was coming north with Lace and I to do some of the walks they hadn’t done since she was small, before the weather cooled down, before his knee operations. Her letters had often mentioned me, he said.

‘I know,’ I looked away from him. ‘I don’t know. We were so looking
forward to it all.' And in the smokey air of the Great Southern, we were struggling with tenses, with whether or not to refer to Beatrice in the past or in the present and muddling them up so much that this curious feeling grew in me that she was neither dead nor alive but merely dislocated from us because of our clumsy use of the English language.

'I want to know why,' he said.

His eyes are like a whippet puppy’s eyes, very clear, very clean eyes, just as Beatrice’s were only without the flecks. They make me fear that when he arrives I will immediately want only to cradle his head in my arms as I cradled hers. I’d like to pour myself just one glass of beaujolais, in preparation for the shock of her eyes in his face, but have been resisting this urge since lunchtime.

When I take out the packets of photographs taken over the summer, of parties and trips to Balmoral or Bondi I’m not looking for anything in particular, except perhaps what shouldn’t be shown to a father. As my fingers find something rough on one of the photos, I don’t remember what I’ve done until I look down. At first I think someone else has defaced the photo of Pepe Botero. Perhaps even a child, for it has the superficial look of say a moustache scribbled onto a Mona Lisa in a magazine. But there is handwriting too and it’s just recognizable as mine. Die, it says, and then some swear words. I must’ve been very drunk. I have no memory of poking him so full of holes. I was selective, only pushing pins into his throat and tongue. Then one in his belly, one under his ear. I remember now. The roar of Chivas Regal in my throat. I remember too when the police came to Beatrice’s house, to batter down the bathroom door, how they found many photographs of Beatrice and Pepe Botero half burnt and melted in the kitchen sink. But thrown under the tap before their faces had totally gone. The burns had pushed out or disintegrated their cheeks and made bubbles in their foreheads. I imagine it was Beatrice who burnt them but perhaps I’m wrong.

Held to the light, the photo I have attacked isn’t dissimilar to the horse head at the exhibition. But whereas in that picture, the holes of light lent the mare a soulful, sad wisdom, the holes I punched in Botero make him look afraid. His arm’s up; against the taking of the photo which he always hated but now it looks as if he is fending off my own savage stabbing. The photo shows a crust of red wine on his lips like an old man’s secret lipstick. He is wearing Beatrice’s crimson shot silk jacket. He was always borrowing from her. We’d only ever seen him in two of his own shirts.

Why did Pepe Botero appear at Lena’s party? No one seems to know very clearly but I remember he came in his red and white shirt with his hair braided and tucked under into a club. He didn’t live in the street. Perhaps he was vaguely known to the girl right at the end. ‘But so what,’ Beatrice would say, ‘that I don’t know much about him.’
He kissed her a few hours after arriving, standing on a root of a fig tree to be as tall. 'You're drunk!' A blonde prepubescent boy said to me in a voice full of disdain.

'No. I'm not.'

'You are so.'

But if he was right, I was a very watchful drunk. I was watching their first kiss.

I remember now lots of hair like something full of foreboding. Loosened from its plait his was long and black and began to cover her face from my view. If only she'd cut off her hair and worn boots not strappy sandals. As he punched her, he must also have trodden all over her feet. At first the police doctor thought he might've tortured her, the injuries on her feet were so much more profound than was usual in usual cases of assault. If only I'd told her that one night, at one party, he pulled my elbow behind my back and pushed me into a dark and unknown room. In there he squeezed my cheek and said, you are very bewtifool personne, the way he did to Beatrice. As if somehow the fact he perceived you like this after he'd had two bottles of wine to drink was something wonderful.

'You're a bewtiffill personne but I'm so jealous. I not like it when you two laugh together like that. You've been together haven't you.'

'No. No we haven't.'

'She told me you have.'

'No.' But it was totally black in the unknown room when he tried to kiss me with his long tongue. 'This will be our secret,' he said and moved out of the room. Then only a week later, he had headbutted Sasha Marchant, the delicate and funny performance poet from Melbourne, who'd know Lena for years. Sasha had said something mildly derogatory about Pepe Botero, enfolded in a joke.

'The trouble is,' said Beatrice in the taxi we took home, 'that he makes me feel so beautiful. Even though he's smaller than I am, and it's so awkward sometimes we laugh. I'm like that salmon hibiscus on your verandah, I just come and come and come.'

But in the taxi she was trembling. Had I seen how fast he had moved in on Sasha, she wanted to know. And tried to show me bruises from the last weekend, when after seeing her laughing with another man he'd grabbed her arm. I just sat there, saying nothing, listening to her listing other things about him that contradicted his bad behaviour and meant they were meant. Fragile coincidences such as their birthdays being on the same days in April. Or did I know their handwriting was interchangeable? Not even Lena had been able to tell it apart.

'But, isn't it true,' I asked, 'that when you stay at his place, you have to leave by dawn?'

'Oh yes but that's just because of who he's sharing the house with. It's easier.'

'Sounds like horrible heterosexual behaviour to me,' I said.
‘Sometimes it’s nice for me too, waking up on my own. Last night, for instance, I was dreaming that someone kissed your posy rash.’

‘My posy rash.’

She took my hand. ‘No, posy. In the dream, as in real life, it was shaped like the curve of old verse people used to place inside romantic rings for their lovers to wear.’

‘So who kissed my posy rash?’

She wouldn’t say but that was how she flirted. Alcoholically, she was more resilient. When we reached my place she said we must have just one more drink to make sure we slept. And when I refused took the same roof route as her dog, to climb into my bedroom window carrying a bottle of champagne. She was paying one hundred and fifty dollars an hour to have the broken blood vessels of her cheeks removed by laser so why shouldn’t we drink a sixty dollar bottle of champagne. Her toes were as cold as the bottle. She was kissing my cheeks or I was kissing hers.

I sit looking at photographs. They are all slightly out of focus, the lens always focused more on the objects or paintings beyond the people. He is so out of focus his face is like a rotting moon on a white stalk above the crimson coat. The print behind him is of some kind of procession where animals on their hind legs and people on all fours are progressing towards the sea.

I make myself a pot of fresh spearmint tea and sit watching the leaves float. The green of a pistachio nut lying half out of its shell matches the leaves. This is how it has been since Beatrice died. As if everything I look at is a still life painting: every object on my table weighted and profound. One day in front of a Cezanne in the Musee d’Orsay, Beatrice said, tears had sort of leapt from her father’s eyes. When he retired he’d fulfilled a lifelong wish to see Paris by taking a 14 day coach tour. It was the way the ripe fruit were sitting, he wrote on the back of the postcard of the same picture. Almost ready to rot but not. Lush.

And I thought he might almost have been writing about Beatrice. For once Lena had told me Beatrice’s age it was apparent if you looked, or when she had a hangover. He too was on the point of turn. He was like the patches on an autumn frangipani flower, the brown spreading into the yellow, but when he arrived at the door, she shed about thirty years to become uncertain and skittish. She’d light a long cigarette to hide her confusion. She’d smell his neck.

I walk up the stairs to see from the second floor front verandah any sign of her father in the street. Lacey walks behind me on her big paws. I used to stand here on some nights, my window a perfect frame of Pepe Botero and Beatrice beginning their drunken wind home from the top of the street. Riley Street at the city end had been closed to traffic for years, so the taxis could never take you right to your door.
The bruise on my nipple looks like cancer, I cannot tell anyone and already have had to stop Lena who still wanted to playfully lift up my t-shirt. I press the bruise until it hurts. Only after Beatrice had actually died did all the bites on my neck and chin turn yellow and obvious.

‘Who on earth has been kissing you?,’ Lena said to me so strangely yesterday I wondered had she guessed as well as fearing that she’d guessed wrong and thought Pepe Botero had left them there. She wouldn’t touch me and went away crying when I said I just couldn’t say.

‘I’d never do that to you,’ Beatrice always said to him, wiping the red lipstick off his cheek or chin. For my birthday, elaborately wrapped, she gave me her favourite French novel. On every page where there was mention of love, she put a kiss. My memories make me feel like sicking up. I remember saying she must bite me and that she didn’t want to. Bite me, put in all your hand, I think I kept saying. And maybe I made her and if so, against her will. She crept out early in the morning, first downstairs, but the door was deadlocked, so then back up into my room and like a frightened child out of my window. I remember that she’d looked afraid. Of me. So that I can’t tell her father about how his daughter was the last time I saw her.

Pepe Botero only had a hand like a small olive glove. They said he must have punched her when she was down, for quite a long time, for such injuries. Or kicked with the court shoes on, always so highly polished, that she’d adored. How she’d managed to lock him out wasn’t yet known, or whether she had died from head injuries or all the pills she’d begun to take once safely inside her bathroom.

My last lover before I came home to Australia was a thirty-six-year-old writer who survived by translating Harlequin romances into French. Her own novel in progress lived in the bottom drawer of a black desk, underneath a haphazard array of the faces and breasts of other girls. The novel was to be about her grandmother who’d been a bean farmer in the South, whose portrait had fallen to the bottom of a frame on a cluttered bookshelf. Monique said look at the size of her hands. Ouf! She was a giantess, yes? Holding her own delicate fingers up to the broad photo hand before snapping off small dark pieces of George Sand’s chocolate face from the patisserie on rue du Cherche-Midi.

There are things I won’t be able to tell you, should I say to her father? So many misapprehensions. Only last night for instance, did I realize the call Beatrice and I always thought was some kind of strange night bird, was the sound of children winding up and down their garden’s hills hoist. If I open the window things are momentarily much clearer. The children wind it down and then hang themselves from it to fly around through the air. A peculiarly Australian kind of carousel, I can imagine turning around to say to Beatrice who’d be holding ice cubes over her swollen eyes, in my sun chair, in preparation for her first glass of white wine for the day; her
dog's head in her lap; her stories of Pepe Botero rolling indiscriminately from her tongue so that I came to know exactly how he kissed the top of her very round forehead. I remember how the top of its dome was even in death like a detail from a Paula Becker portrait postcard I've found to show her father if the moment arises.

The children are tearing around with barely any clothes on and will be itchy and tearful when they are called inside. Beatrice always said that the church we could see had a steeple with bits at the top like antlers. When it rings its bells the children drop off the hoist.

Sometimes I'd think Beatrice would be unfriendly. Say if I caught sight of her in the mornings, in the street, but really she was taking into her house, hangovers too monstrous for my cures let alone conversation.

When I lift up my shirt again, the cloth seems so old it looks dark green not black. If possible, or is it just the late afternoon light, the yellow bruise is deeper and I can make out the exact imprint left from her little teeth. Some cars have their lights on, some don't but thank goodness it will soon be dark. Beatrice and I used to agree it is much easier to lie in the semi-light of evening, when if your skin blushes in a line beneath your posy rash, it only looks to the person deceived like the attractive flush from lunchtime's sun.

In my sitting room, her father's hair is like a thick white mane once hogged for pony club now left to go wild. I tell him how my father used to trick the tickies going through the gates at dusk with a fake padlock tied to the back of the float. Beatrice's father responds by describing Beatrice as an eleven year old who was dead keen on a collection of bottle ticks in glass jars on her window ledge, waiting to see if they ever became less bloated.

To dive into small eastern NSW histories like this, is a mutual decision. I feel our stories bumping and parting and moving on. Every memory of even the smallest itch from a coastal tick must be told or invented, any precarious personal detail will do, as long as it isn't the immediate past. And when we have exhausted this it is Beatrice’s father who moves the conversation to France and art. He tells me of his disappointment to find so few Chagall pictures in Paris but that the postcard shops sold reproductions ten times better than those he had found here in Sydney. The colours of these reminded him of the lantanas in flower. Did I know what he meant? The greens against the pinks: the particularly lyrical shades that weed reaches in spring, on the back road to the town of Green Pigeon. Did I ever hear Beatrice describing the remarkable soil? he wants to know. ‘So fertile it could grow babies?’

He beams. I have remembered. I have looked slightly to the left of him. I can only see the outline of my face reflected in the glass of a picture frame and would have to move closer to try to make out the features within.