

Boat people

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Story title: Boat people

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The early morning road sinks and bends into the creek floodplain, tacks through enormous river red gums and rises again into straight, scrub hedged paddocks. On this familiar Wednesday morning journey Marvy is driving absent mindedly, mentally crafting a poem, shuffling lines and words for terror and friendship. That is until what she sees far ahead causes her mouth to gap, her foot to sigh off the accelerator, the poem to lose its grip on the gunwales of her mind.

Facing her approach is a dark red sedan parked askew on the opposite verge. A long haired figure is falling out of the passenger door, stumbling around the back of the car and zagging onto the middle of the road. The fleeing figure comes into focus. It's a young woman in pale blue jeans and cream top. A man in black jeans and a grey tank top leaps from the driver's door, sets off in pursuit.

Marvy checks her rear view mirror. There are no other cars behind or ahead. She slows to walking speed, gasps as the man's swinging fist connects with the back of the woman's head, knocking her sprawling onto the road. Punches and kicks rain on an inadequate umbrella of fending arms. He pauses in a boxer's crouch as she scrambles upright, staggers away. The man chases and catches the woman, pushes her over, curling and rolling on the road's white centre lines.

She fights upright, runs along the road and off the white gravel verge down a slight embankment to the strip of scrawny roadside scrub. Past the red car now with her window down, Marvy can hear the woman crying, pleading with the man. He advances with fists cocked. The woman picks up a hefty looking stick. Marvy does a rapid U turn onto the verge alongside her, blocking the man, and opening the passenger door.

'Get in.'

The woman does so immediately, and Marvy cranks her window closed. Doors clunk locked in unison. The man stares at them. He's dressed to show off inked, muscled arms,

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despite the coolness of the April morning. He stalks back to stand at the side of the red car, glaring at them.

Marvy looks at the woman. 'Are you ok?'

No answer, no eye contact. Only sobs, glimpses of pale face behind livid hair, dark grit or blood smeared on cream windcheater. The man, hands on hips now, seems to be expecting the woman to come, waiting for her obedience.

Marvy removes keys, says, 'Lock the doors,' and gets out, watches the woman press the locks. She walks slowly towards the man with her palms out, not threatening, not retreating. Advancing.

The man stares. She wonders what it is with the stares and glares, what he sees now. A strange girl who should be terrified of him, but apparently isn't?

When she is just a few steps away the man turns quickly as if he's remembered an urgent something, jumps in his car, revs the engine, spins wheels shotgunning gravel, skids onto bitumen and accelerates away towards the river town.

Marvy returns to her car. Reaching across, she hands the woman a packet of tissues from the glove box. A red cheek is revealed, a slightly gob smacked gawk before the face is rapidly hidden again, the nose blown. She looks early twenties, Marvy thinks, not petite but smaller and younger than her attacker. A semi rumbles past, shivering the hatchback and trailing a whiff of doomed sheep.

'I'm Marvy.' She offers a hand, the woman half lifts hers, and they touch palms briefly, fingers lingering.

The woman sweeps back her hair, winces as fingertips meet cheek.

'Marvy? Erm, I'm Bianca. I... ' She sniffs, blows her nose. 'Sorry about the hassle. Thank you for stopping. I. It's...'

'It's alright Bianca.'

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‘It’s all my fault. We’re living in an old caravan on his cousin’s farm. It’s so lonely, so cold. I...we. We fight sometimes.’

A trickle of words build to a stream burbling around sniffs. A need to talk, to be heard. Like no one has listened to her for a long time. And here’s Marvy so big and close in the little car – warm eyes, dense black braids beaded to her shoulders, the calm belling of her vowels. And the car – old and small, but solid, safe.

‘It’s my fault. All this. It used to be really good. We were in love. But now I’m useless, he tells me. *Who else would want you?* He says. Then he got physical. It’s like he waited till I had nowhere to go, no support. Now I have no job, nothing. All the money I’d saved up. Nearly gone. He has to know. Everything. Shuts me off from everything. I’m. Nobody. My family don’t even know where I am...won’t let me call them.’ Shoulders shrink, glances bounce at windows, scan, retreat.

‘Where is *home* Bianca? I mean, your family?’

She names a town on the west coast. Marvy’s heard of it, knows the daunting geography of continents.

‘Sometimes I think it’s getting better, but then things just, like, turn bad again. I don’t know why. What I always do wrong.’ Long black hair curtains her mottled face so that she has to continually swab it back behind her ears.

‘It’s not your fault Bianca.’

She looks at Marvy, shakes her head. She says today’s violence started because she suggested they move to the river town and she could get a job; what she’d really like is to go home, closer to family and friends. She’d get her old job back at the supermarket. They liked her there, wanted her to stay. ‘I liked it too. That’s where I met him. He was a surfer, or thought he was.’ A wry smile. ‘I really miss the people there. The chats. I liked helping people, finding stuff. In the shop I mean. I felt like, I dunno. Everyone knew my name. Bee.

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That's what my parents called me when I was little. Bee. It was good. I loved being called that.

'But not him. Calls me names you don't want to hear. Today he went psycho. Like he does. Punching me, swerving all over the road. I thought we were gonna crash.' He accused her of 'hooking up' with an old boyfriend, called her a 'fucking slut.'

Behind flinching wet lashes, hooded eyes cling to Marvy's soft gaze.

'I'm stupid aren't I? Piss weak.'

'No.'

'I stuff everything up.'

'No. This is not your fault Bee. I think we should go to the medical centre. Get you some help.'

Bee looks along the road. It's clear. Swallows, nods. 'Alright.'

Marvy starts the engine, eases back onto the road. They drive through paddocks, soft hills on the right, flattening towards the lakes on the left; past an eddy of sheep flowing across a slope, a red shirted woman on an ag bike, bright silent movement against the green. A white car passes, then a caterpillar of cyclists, helmets polished river stones in the sun. The lead rider seems to recognize Marvy because he smiles and lifts a hand. Marvy reciprocates.

'It could be so nice, this area,' Bee says, like she's just realized it. 'Have you been here, like, in Australia, for long?' She looks at Marvy. 'Sorry. I mean...'

'It's alright Bee. But when people say that, they want to know where from originally?'

'No. Um. I...'

'Africa. Nigeria.'

'Oh.'

'Been here since I was eight.'

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Bee almost smiles. 'Your name. It's different...I never heard it before.'

'Short for Marvellous. Funny huh?'

'Marvellous. It's beautiful. A really beautiful name. Sorry. I've stuffed up your day.

You were going somewhere and now you've had to turn back?'

'Just to my poetry group. I try to go every Wednesday morning. I'm so lucky it's a non-contact day at uni.'

'Poetry. That sounds good.'

'It's so good.'

The road twists and dips into the dent of the floodplain accommodating again the copse of red gums, trunks larger than her car, shadows swamping the road. The hatchback is a wink of moving sky beneath their great canopies. One giant shows where the people of the bulrushes, a star in the great constellation of nations, crafted a canoe from its bark in past millennia. Their vibrant presence will not be erased and that delights Marvy each time she passes.

The road lifts into downy paddocks, at the road edge of one a tumbledown stone cottage warp roofed around a gone wild sprawling fruit tree.

'You know this *is* a really nice area Bee. People will help you. I can help.'

'Oh. There he is.' The red car is coming around the sweeping bend where the road crosses the railway line, slowing.

'What do you want to do?'

'All my stuff is in the caravan or in his car. My phone, my clothes. Stuff.' She shows an empty palm, her head down now, face again hidden by hair. 'I have to go back.'

'You don't have to. We can go to someone, get help. Get your things.'

'I'll be alright. Don't worry.'

The car drifts past, the man glaring.

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‘Stop, please Marvy, it’s alright.’

‘Will you be safe?’

‘Yes. I’ll be alright. Honestly. Please stop.’

Brake lights of the red car ignite. Marvy glides off the road, watches the man do a U turn, subdued, approaching at a creep, creepily Marvy thinks, and stopping an oddly long way behind them - fifty metres at least.

Bee puts her scrunched tissues on the console. ‘Sorry.’

‘They’re only tissues. And don’t say sorry. It’s so not your fault Bee. That’s what he’s taught you to think but it’s not true. And you’re not alone. People will help. I’ll give you my number if you like.’

‘You’re kind Marvy. Marvellous.’

They step out of the car and Marvy wishes her well across the pond of blue roof. With a fingertip Bee strokes the edge of a smile like it’s a stranger to her face.

Marvy watches her walking away. At the red car she pauses, turns her face to Marvy for a few moments before opening the door and being devoured. When it drives slowly past and they exchange a wave Marvy catches a lip readable thank you and a flash of blue numbers written on Bee’s palm. The driver stares straight ahead.

Back in her car, Marvy’s shaking fingers search connection. She doesn’t want to interrupt their poetry with a phone call so she sends a text to the cottage on the lake shore. *Running late. Be there soon.* She knows the poets will be worried, curious. She’s younger than most of their own children, is always early to poetry, making coffee, hungry for words, laughter, pastries.

After texting, Marvy does a u turn and recommences her journey. She feels a deep longing for her friends, the welcome, the joy, all the things Bee deserves too. The lounge chairs that swallow you, words and stories, friendly laughter and people who see you. On this

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still day the lake will be serene silver, dun reed sideburns in creek indents, grassy banks flecked with autumn poems. Old ochre wooden fishing boat welded to the water. Sturdy kinked pier of bleached planks.

‘It’s like a painting,’ Peter said last week, making short work of a slice of Roger’s incredible home-made apricot pie.

‘It could do with a pelican,’ said Kathy.

Marvy turns right towards the lake coming into view. The empty passenger seat haunts – Bee’s there crushed in the sobbed tissues in the console.

Trembling click of indicator, left turn onto the thin lake shore road, Marvy’s poet’s eye drawn to the curved prow of the faded ochre boat that never moves. The wooden boat that always reminds her. Milaad and her swimming. Children of disparate terrors and languages who kept each other alive until the Maltese fishing boat appeared. Stout curves on the chopped sea, shouts, a thrown rope, planks firm and strong under their wrinkled feet.

Her poem kicks up from depth, word and breath, life and death. Deserts and oceans of fear traversed. Valetta’s stone, firm against her spine, skinny Milaad, next to her, African children from opposite sides of the Sahara now bonded forever. Tourist groups in the ancient square like herded sheep, stepping around them, on them, eyes fixed straight ahead lest they be cast adrift from their flag toting guides. They didn’t even see the two scraps of alien flotsam, or pretended so. Milaad in Canada now, studying genetics at the University of Toronto. ‘What a gift to the world,’ Marvy told Roger early one Wednesday morning.

‘There’s a poem in that, Milaad and you, gifts to the world,’ he’d suggested. She’ll email her poem to Milaad when it’s right, when the poets have helped her and the words feel right.

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They sit around the table with coffee and Roger's apricot pie. They've saved it for her arrival. Their expectant eyes on her. She tells the story, voice struggling at the end.

'What should I have done? What should we do?'

'We should do what you did Marvy. You gave refuge. Bravery, a little hope and confidence,' says Sal.

Aileen, a writer of fine connecting detail, asks, 'What happened to the stick you said she picked up in the scrub?'

'The stick? Oh yes. I didn't see it when Bee was in my car so it must have been propped by her leg. But she was carrying it as she walked and got in his car. I noticed that.'

The writers eat and sip coffee in the following unusual silence. Marvy looks out at the old ochre boat, tastes warm sweet apricot, words shuffling into their places.