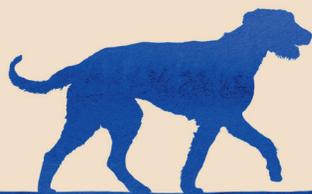




EMILY SPURR

A
MILLION
THINGS



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A gem of a novel.' Graeme Simsion

The First Days

Silence isn't really silent.

It's not loud, exactly. But it sits under things, making the little sounds stand out: my heartbeat in my ears, the sharp echo of the kitchen clock, the fridge humming. I move, and the rustle of me fills my head. Splinter laps water from his bowl. His eyes tell me when it's time to eat. Alarms go off when it's time to wake.

Sleep, wake, eat, school, home, homework, dinner, TV, sleep. Wake.

Time goes weird. It keeps tripping over itself and dropping things. I stand in one room and then I'm sitting in another but how I got there is gone.

And something grows. Pushing into my head. Something else.

Day 14
Saturday

The smell eventually drifts into all the corners of the house. It's got to the point I can smell it from the lounge room. A heavy stink, seeping weighty and liquid; bad enough to drag me up from sleep.

At first, before I moved to the couch, I tried sleeping in your bed: wrapped in your doona, one of your T-shirts pressed to my nose. Each breath in taking a little more of you, till all your scents were gone. Till only the warm, swampy smell of dog and the nothing smell of me were left and your pillow held only the shape of my head. Then this new smell started to invade.

It's time to clean out the fridge. Your meal, the last one you didn't eat. I heated it for you, had it sitting on the bench and it was still there when I went to bed. So I covered it in plastic and put it away.

I know I should chuck it out. It's going mouldy, growing life of its own. Releasing spores, probably, that are landing on every other thing in the fridge. But I don't.

I imagine you bursting through the door and asking, *What the hell is that smell?* And then, looking at me: *You're nearly eleven!*

Why didn't you throw it out, for Christ's sake, why didn't you give it to Splinter?

He follows like a shadow. My Splinter, my pup, my scruffy grey stretch of mutt. I trip over him, wake to his breath on my face. He sits with his big dog head resting on my knee. I look at his brown eyes, lean my face into his and inhale the familiar humid breath, the scent of dog biscuits and bones.

I woke to Splinter's nose in my face that day too. That first day. The room was cold, colder than usual cold. I looked into your bedroom: the bed was made. Into the kitchen, and the back door was open. The air stung my cheeks: I puffed experimentally and I could see my breath. There were leaves on the floor. I couldn't see you in the backyard but I knew you were there. You'd have shut the back door if you'd gone out somewhere. I remember looking at the clock: seven. On a Sunday morning. It was still grey light outside and there was no smell of coffee. I went out: saw the big-shed door ajar. I pushed it open.

And in that second our house vanished. I stood, feet in the grass and nothing but blackness behind me.

There was a breeze. It's funny how air's just there. You don't notice it. Looking at you, I could feel it touching my face, the pressure of it on my skin, the tickle as it lifted a hair off my cheek, as it shifted ever so slightly, making the rope creak.

The back door slammed and the sound sent a familiar shock up my spine. Or it would have if I'd been standing in my body rather than slightly to the left. The alarm *chik chik chik* of a blackbird exploded in my ears, too loud and too sharp. I could hear the grass growing.

My ears have always been sensitive to you leaving. Each time you'd go, noises muffled and sharpened and silence got loud. I'd stand still, trying not to breathe, waiting for the door to open and for you to come back through it. The silence you left after you grabbed the keys from the bowl on the table and slammed out the door would stand like a person beside me. The bang made me jump every time. Even though I knew it was coming. Knew from the second your eyes lost focus and tightened and you stopped seeing me and saw only this thing *ruining your life*. You'd shout, grab those keys and stalk to the door, and bang. And I would jump.

I cried, when I was little. But you'd come back. My nose would squish into your shoulder, your arms around me and the warm smell of you in my whole head. The knot in my tummy would loosen and melt with the tingle that ran up my neck into my skull as you stroked my hair and made my eyes close. It almost made the before worth it.

You just got *angry*. It just was—like the weekends you'd get sad and stay in bed—and I stopped hiding under the doona, stopped crying about it. The shock of the door would go through my spine but I'd stay where I was. I'd be still and Splints would sit on my feet and we'd wait. My heart racing. Sometimes you'd be back before we moved, my toes warm under his bum even as my legs went numb from the standing. Other times you wouldn't, and Splinter would move. Or I would. I'd do my homework, or clean up, or fix whatever it was that made you snatch up the keys this time.

Sometimes I'd flip through the fat blue dictionary, looking for the right word for it, the feeling inside. *Agitated* was almost

right, but it didn't quite fit. It matched the chill of the tiny bubbles popping in my chest but not the stillness. *Aimless* felt close: floaty. I floated, but I always had something to do. When it was summer we'd go outside and I'd cut the grass. Or weed the veggie patch you liked *in theory*. And sometimes we'd just lie in the sun, Splinter's big head on my lap, and I'd watch the swirling red behind my eyelids. I guess I was *ambivalent*. But that wasn't right either because it hurt, you being gone. I never did find the right word.

Then you'd come back. You'd pull me into your chest and squash my nose into your shoulder and everything would be okay. I was used to that. Used to the nipping worry of not having you here. Used to the little voice that said maybe this time was different but knowing it wasn't. *Knowing* you'd always come back.

Now I don't know what to do.

But I suppose you're not really gone, not properly. Not if I know where you are.

That morning I closed the door to the shed and opened the back door and went inside. I walked through rooms that were all surface, my knees bending at the wrong time, each step ending in my hips as the floor happened too soon.

I climbed under my doona.

My breath was warm under there and slow, like the ocean.

After a while the room was close to dark and Splinters' big head rested on my leg, the weight of him making my toes tingle. Sometimes he'd lick his nose and sigh. I stayed where I was. When it was very dark a paw thumped through the doona onto my arm. He whined.

I got up, shut the back door and fed him.

The next day I went to school.

So, here I am. Here. Not here.

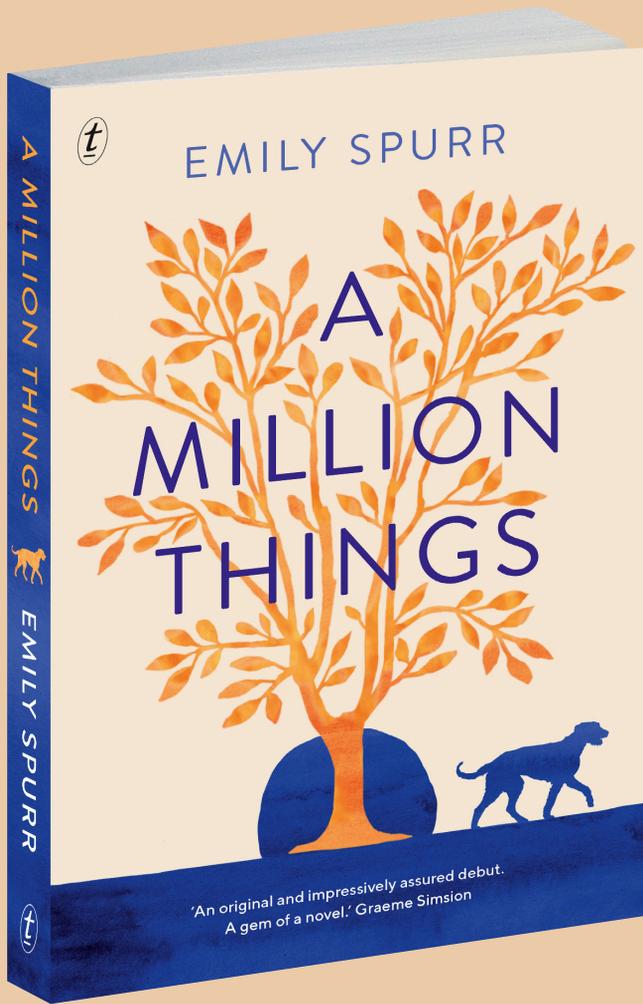
Everything's here and not here.

You.

The house.

Me.

I don't know what anything is anymore.



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