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'Such a wise and
humorous writer.'
Australian

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The

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Fragments

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Fragments

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TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

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Brisbane, Queensland, 1986

Inga Karlson was the stars and the light and the true north in the history of the twentieth century. She was beautiful, and that helped, people being what they are. She wrote from her feelings for all of humanity, a kind of herd empathy that only wanted the best for us. In that tiny forest cottage in the mountains of Austria, she sat up at three months, held a knife-sharpened pencil at six months, said 'I see bird' to her illiterate farmworker parents when barely a year old. When she was eight, the village took up a collection to send her away to school. She was marked from the beginning. Chosen.

Caddie Walker is not marked or chosen. She is twenty-eight years old, the same age as Inga Karlson when she died. Everyone expected Caddie would go to university and she did, for a while, but everything unravelled and her father was sick and then, when she was twenty-one, he died and everything stayed unravelled. The girls from school are all mothers now, or nurses or teachers, and every couple of years

the part-timers at River City Reader lift off for Barcelona or London or Milan, where they intern at literary agencies or open sangria bars, and a new group, younger than before, bursts through the doors and Caddie trains them too, tolerating their airy confidence that they are meant for grander things. Sometimes she passes women on the street—suits and court shoes and briefcases—and she wonders what it is that they know and she doesn't. Sometimes she wakes convinced she is in her room at home and the window is on her right and the ridges on her pink hobnail bedspread are soft fur under her chin and if she keeps her eyes squeezed tight her father will come in to open the blind and kiss her forehead. She brushes her teeth and washes her face every morning and every night. She is not afraid of effort but she is afraid of reward. She is thin and that's fine with her: she's suspicious of the soft, the obvious, the cosy, the comfortable, as though taking the easy road even once would lull her to death.

It is after four when she lets herself in. Soon the sun will set red and gold behind the television towers on Mount Coottha. Caddie is sticky and gritty-eyed. Her forearms are glowing pink and there is a new blister on her heel. On the bus on the way home she kept opening her bag to check the sheet of sketchpad paper.

As she opens the door a dense fug of sour air wafts past. She yells hello up the hall; Pretty and Terese hello back. She leaves her shoes at the top of the hall, lined up with the others.

She shares a house with Pretty and Terese but it's not a *share house*. Those years are behind them: marijuana plants on windowsills and lounges scavenged on hard waste day and

cigarette holes in everything and that peculiar smell of pepper and spaghetti that infests worker's cottages teetering on their stumps in West End and Highgate Hill and Dutton Park. They live in Auchenflower now, in a house that barely leans at all. Pretty and Terese have the two smaller rooms on the left so they can sleep in one and use the other for their clothes and sports equipment and desks.

Caddie's is the large room on the right, with wide boards and high ceilings, with a box window overlooking the sliver of garden and the mandatory jacaranda, a mass of purple on the footpath in spring. Against the wall is a heavy oak wardrobe—the kind with engraved panels and a centre mirror—that was her parents'. Books are piled in corners and double stacked on the bricks-and-boards shelves along the far wall, but fewer than you might expect—there is a grace to libraries that appeals to her. Next to her bed is her father's copy of *All Has an End*, and also *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.

There is less dust than might be found in the room of a single woman in her twenties and a strange collection of found trinkets among the practical bits and pieces on her dresser: some foreign coins that seem too light for their size; a shiny black pendant of a domino she found in the street; a dozen tiny white bones, soothing to tumble through her fingers at night; and a perfect green glass marble that is always cold regardless of the weather.

She drops her bag beside the bed, retrieves the precious sheet from inside it and pins it to the corkboard. Later, she'll transcribe it twice: in the purple-covered notebook she

keeps in her bag and on a separate page to hide in her bedside drawer.

Now, though, she removes the salad roll, unrecognisable as food, from her hessian bag and takes it down the wide jungle hall past the white metal tiered stands and upended fruit crates and rusty stools on which sit a forest of plastic pots of anthuriums and ferns and peace lilies and snake plants, all with damp leaves like they've just been misted. The lounge/dining/kitchen is a thin open space. On the other side of the dining table there's an oscillating fan on a tall plastic stand, humming like an insect and shaking its head in vague disapproval.

Pretty is lying on the couch, watching television with the sound off. He's still wearing his basketball clothes and the deep neckline and long armholes show his ribbed chest. Caddie bumps his feet with her hip until he moves them.

'Good day?' he says to her, eyes on the screen. 'Sell lots of books?'

'Day off.'

'Lucky for some.'

Terese is in the kitchen stirring a dented aluminium pot that can only contain chilli lentil soup. She's wearing Pretty's jeans cinched at the waist with a too-long belt and a tentish blouse.

'This is my last dinner for the month, you both know that, right?' says Terese. 'I have a huge project due.'

'Got it,' says Pretty.

'And I don't mean springing for a pizza. We made an agreement. Vegetables. Saving money. Caddie?'

But Caddie is outside the gallery, listening to the woman—Rachel—quoting from the fragments.

‘Earth to Caddie,’ Terese says.

Caddie Walker and Terese Xanthidi, the last two names called for every school list and test and roll. Eighteen years ago, on the way home from the symphony at the City Hall—the sole music education day at their overwrought, under-resourced state school—one bench on the charter bus was missing its seat entirely. Mrs Powell faced a dilemma: keep the whole class waiting for another bus or trust Terese and Caddie to wait for an hour until she could return and collect them. Sure enough, in an hour’s time they were sitting exactly where they’d been left—Terese with a sprained ankle, Caddie drenched and smelling like moss and pigeon shit and neither able to stop giggling. They formed an unbreakable, soul-sibling bond that lasted through separate high schools, various boyfriends, Terese meeting Pretty and Pretty moving in. Terese’s mother Olympia still invites Caddie to Christmas lunch and plans something busy for them all to do on Father’s Day.

‘Hey,’ Pretty says to her. ‘Wake up, Australia.’

‘I just heard something that isn’t possible.’

‘If it happened, it’s possible,’ Terese says. ‘By definition.’

Caddie heads to the kitchen where she bins the roll, fills a glass from a passata bottle of water in the fridge and rests it against her forehead before draining it. She walks to the other side of the dining room and turns up the fan. In front of the whip of air she lifts her hair at the back and feels her neck damp and clammy. The buzzing of the fan vibrates under her skin. She feels like she’s seen a ghost.

‘Are you crazy? Don’t do that, you’ll get a stiff neck,’ says Terese, tapping the spoon against the side of the pot. ‘Another half-hour.’

‘What’s in it?’ says Pretty.

‘This and that. Recipes are for drones. So. What is this impossible thing that happened?’

‘I met this old woman. She recited a line from a book no one’s ever read. Well, two people read it back in the thirties but they’re dead now. There are no copies of the book in existence. Only a few burnt sheets.’

‘Inga Whatever book, that famous lost one?’ says Pretty. ‘Don’t make that face. I’m an engineer, not a labrador—we read *All Has an End* at school. And *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. I can read. It was OK, actually. And everyone loves a good unsolved murder. Her picture was in yesterday’s paper. Intense. Like a scary sexy nun.’

‘She was just making it up. The woman,’ Caddie went on. ‘She must’ve been. Making it up.’

‘Come and taste this, one of you.’ Terese, with an airplane spoon cleared for take-off.

Pretty shakes his head. ‘Don’t want to spoil the surprise.’

“‘It wasn’t them.’”

‘What wasn’t who?’

‘The mafia. That killed her, I guess. She said that. And the line. There was something in the way she said it, like she knew it was going to drive me crazy.’

The woman’s face, Caddie realises, was a magician’s in the seconds before turning over the card you’d memorised. A fractional smile of expectation and control.

‘Forget about it, Cads. Sometimes people say things just to spin your wheels,’ says Pretty.

‘But say she wasn’t. How could she possibly have known the line? The only two people who read that book are dead. That’s what everyone thinks. But what if that’s wrong?’

‘Cads. I bleed maroon, you know that. But—when did Karlson die? Before the war?—if some old lady read that book in America in 1930-something, I don’t think she’d be living in Brissie.’ Pretty switches off the set and ambles to the kitchen, gingerly, toes raised like he’s picking his way across a lawn of bindis. He stands behind Terese and wraps his arms around her and takes the spoon and stirs. He is six foot three, she is five foot two. Terese smiles as he envelops her.

Caddie finds their relationship inspiring and depressing at the same time.

‘Why not?’ says Caddie. ‘Why wouldn’t she live here?’ Brisbane, her father used to say, was like a member of your family: you yourself could call it out for anything and everything, but heaven help anyone else who cast aspersions.

‘God, *all* of you stinks,’ says Terese cheerfully. ‘Shower.’

Pretty sniffs theatrically at his armpit, kisses Terese on the cheek and heads down the hall. ‘Your little old lady was a stirrer, Cads. A senior practical joker.’

‘Probably,’ says Caddie.

‘Definitely,’ says Terese.

Now that the couch has been abandoned, Caddie lies down full stretch and hugs a cushion to her waist. ‘I went back to the exhibition and spoke to the cloakroom man and the security guards. No one remembered her.’

‘You’re not weird at all.’

‘Her first name was Rachel.’

‘Too many novels. All those made-up stories. You should read more biographies. Or a story about convicts, that’s just as good. Although the art gallery would’ve been a great place to be today. Cool as. Basketball, he must be mental. I went to the movies with Lisa.’

The possibilities of it. The endless branching scenarios, all competing in Caddie’s imagination.

‘What if someone found a Shakespeare play we didn’t know about? Or if Harper Lee had written another novel and someone read it and remembered it?’

‘But she didn’t.’

‘But what if she had? Just imagine.’

‘It doesn’t taste exactly like I expected,’ says Terese, spoon to her lips. ‘Maybe I should have measured the chilli.’

“‘The seconds spent on this earth and the number of them that truly mattered’”, Caddie says.

‘You and books, heh?’ says Terese. ‘I suppose everyone’s stupid about something.’

During dinner, as Caddie chokes down compulsory lentil soup, Pretty and Terese talk about this year’s election and whether Joh can hold on (Terese: yes; Pretty: no) and whether the Mentals are the best Australian band ever (Terese: yes; Pretty: no). The conversation floats around Caddie like mist.

Afterwards, as Pretty washes and she dries, determination sprouts gossamer roots. Later as she shampoos her hair it burrows deeper; it reaches its tendrils into her imagination

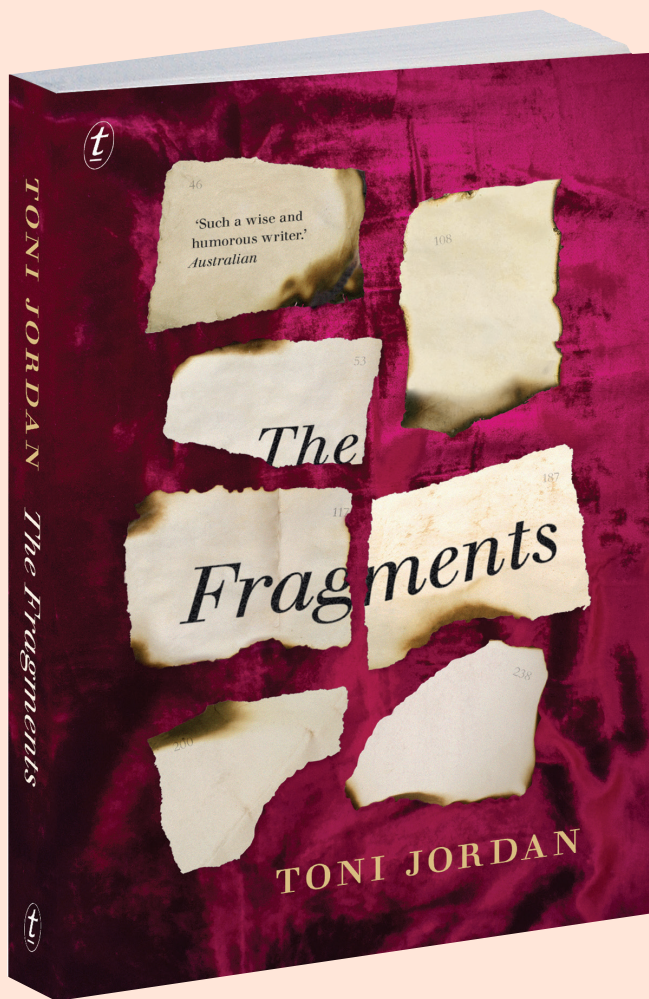
and takes hold. By bedtime Caddie knows she is committed. It is clear to her in a way that nothing else has ever been.

She is going to find the woman with the scarf.

Bursts of clarity like this are rare in anyone's life. She's read this chosen-one story in a hundred books and now, she thinks with a thrill, it has come to her. The nameless thing she's been waiting for. She imagines Inga Karlson herself willing her on: Inga Karlson, whose killer was never brought to justice, who whispers to her in her father's voice. Who speaks to everyone, yet makes you feel that she is speaking only to you.

At midnight Caddie is lying alone in bed as the ceiling fan sways and rattles and the bulb burns above her. As soon as she switches the light off, a mosquito dive-bombs her ear drum; as soon as she switches the light on, it vanishes.

'Do your job,' she says to the gecko in the corner of the ceiling, and it wipes its eye with its tongue.



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First published in Australia by the Text Publishing Company.

