

Habits

Violet stands there, tears streaking her face. That was goodbye.

I don't look in her eyes again.

I can tell she caught feelings for me.

I told her I would leave soon enough, and who knows if we'd ever see each other again. I click the lock on the car doors. Turn the key. The car bursts into life, flickering first, and then we're ready for take-off, ready to zoom on by as planned. As expected.

Violet is behind me now, somewhere between here and the bedroom. I double-checked every nook and cranny before I left, to make sure nothing was left behind. As if I wasn't ever in that room, in case anyone came looking. Better if I could've erased my name from their books, or wiped their memories of me, but nobody will come looking.

Family won't. Maybe they'll call. They know, at least, I'll be home for Christmas.

The view out here is breathtaking, perched on a rock on the cliffside, the tumbling waves deep below. Mum used to come out to places like this, edges of the world, and stare downwards, or use her binoculars to look for birds. Not seagulls, rarely seagulls, but she'd scour the coastline for the prettier birds, the more elusive.

I drove for an hour or so. Passed by houses, and homes, and service stations. Passed by fields, and forests of trees, and patches of emptiness. The sea called for me again, as it does.

"Hi," I say, stepping forward in the line. The menu, boasting of all your expected 'fish and chip shop' norms, is this baby blue colour, like the ocean, without the muck. I order the pack for one – not too hungry, but a single piece of fish wouldn't do a thing for me. The girl who served me is cute, in a sisterly way. Her hair is tied back; she wears the uniform without care, it sulks from her body. But she's cute.

She hands me the wrapped-up fish and chips a little bit later, and I walk back towards the shoreline. Serenity here beats back home. I tear a piece of the fish away, staring out at the sea. Waves crash against the shore. *Why the fuck did I sleep with her, back there?*

You were horny, dude.

Ah.

The chips aren't too soggy, almost oversalted though. I could call my sister this afternoon. When I called a few days ago, she wanted me to come home. She said only if I wanted to, and in her voice, there was the drop. She knew. She clung to her words afterwards like a rope ladder.

I toss my rubbish in the bin and head back towards the car. It's maybe 2:30pm now, bit later. I lied to her, when I was leaving. Said I was headed home but I came here. Climbing into the driver's seat, I can see what dwells of the ocean beyond. It's murky, a murky bluish-green. I never planned on heading home. It's what I tell those nosy enough to ask.

I spent so long there, at the shore. Staring out at the horizon, looking for answers there within it. The funny thing about a horizon is that it speaks little – it says, maybe, *there is so much beyond me*, but then not even a whisper slips from its mouth. Funny even to think a horizon could have a mouth, not like a horizon has any other body part. I turn the key in the ignition, the car flickers into life. It's time. Go to the next town over, or the town after that. Or the town after that.

...

When I stop into the gas station to use the toilet about half-an-hour from the town with the fish and chip shop, and the cute employee there, who I would treat like a sister, a song from the 80s cuts short. I

almost banged the front of the car into the curb, trying to park. The song, something Dad passed down, neared the bridge, neared that moment when all leads towards that climax moment, an archaic scream or a guitar solo, or something uniquely bold and brash, like the lead vocalist flicking a switch inside their head that changes everything. I push open the car door, leaping out. It's not the sticky heat you'd expect if it was summer – it's cool, a cool May breeze. The sun still hangs in the sky, and it burns down. I've got to buy new sunglasses.

"Hi there," the man behind the counter says, giving me a smile. He's not aged well – his hair, balding, is the colour of koalas.

"Can I just use your toilet?" He smirks, digging around behind him for the key. Above his head, and to the left, there was a hook likely for it, but I guess he gave up on hanging it back up.

He hands me the key, after he makes me promise I'll buy a stick of gum or something on my way out. Inside the dingy little room out back, I stare back at my reflection, after peeing. Same old Kian. Some hair out of place. I wash my hands, dry them on the paper towel. It's too small in here, almost claustrophobic. Not that I am. The walls are confronting, when they lean in on you like this. I turn the handle, stepping back into the service station. The man behind the counter spots me, and smirks.

I hand him back the key, buy a packet of gum and a bottle of Gatorade, and head back to the car. He seemed nice enough, the man behind the counter. But I only met him in passing.

Being on the road again is like the family road-trips in the past, when Izzie and I were younger.

We'd head down to somewhere warmer, somewhere greener, just the four of us. Mum and Dad, seated up front, twiddle with the radio, looking for something good. Izzie shoves her headphones into her ears, listening to her early naughties pop music. The space between us was usually saved for her bag; some trips she'd flip through a magazine, or sneak food in there and have a picnic all on her own.

The song on the radio now is something she wouldn't like – alternative rock, gravelly voice, a tune not so much something she could dance to. But in a few minutes, it ends, and the voice of the radio host drones on about their morning, to another radio host, deeper-voiced. Izzie would like it out here, by the beach. I remember the first time we stayed at the bed-and-breakfast. They didn't have a maid who lived on-site – the maid, an older woman named Gladys, I think, came and went almost unnoticed. Jen and Kristen let us swim in the pool out back, even though it was a cooler day, and I remember the sweetest smile on Izzie's face, even as I splashed her. She'd splashed me back after.

It would have been nice to have Izzie here.

I pull into another town – Wagner Bay, from the name on the disappointing sign – soon enough after the gas station, and there's a tavern here, and the village, parallel lines of shops, and a caravan park closer to the ocean. A motel, too.

When we'd stay someplace, some seaside town or bushland set-up, exploring was second-nature. Searching for those hidden gems, as if they were buried underneath rubble, when really, they were in plain sight all along – it became almost the first thing I'd do. After I jumped out of the car. Being alone after the car ride, be it only an hour, or a few hours more – it was the peace I needed, above all else.

An hour or so later I find myself standing outside the tavern, my phone in my pocket, and an older man, maybe in his forties, stumbles by on the phone to his missus. "Yeah nah, I'll be fine," he says, shaking his head, glancing around. He stops dead in his tracks to glance back at the door to the tavern. "You can tell Darryl I'll be an hour or so, max."

Inside, the tavern is darker, but only from the walls and the wooden floorboards. It's nothing like the taverns of a fantasy world, but it's filled with the same sorts of people – the angered men, the drunks, the women with their breasts on show. Less so nowadays. The bartender smiles as I approach – her name, as it says on the nametag, is Heidi.

"Hey," and I see she smiles with her eyes too, "what can I get you?"

I order something to drink, a beer – Heidi eyes me, as she pours it.

“Not from around here, huh?” She chuckles to herself. “Sorry, I like getting to say that.”

I smile back. She’s pretty, maybe the prettiest girl I’ve seen. “Yeah,” I say, “I’m just passing through tonight.”

There’s something uncanny about her. The way she smiles at me, or the way she stands, or the way without question she bats her eyelids not to say she wants me, but to say she doesn’t need me to tempt her. She’s every girl from high school in one, and yet she stands out above them, in the limelight. She is the image of one thousand and one suns, and equal moons too.

But what I feel is not love – never is.

It is a lust. A lust that will burn out with her, when she burns with me.

I order something to eat, because I’m hungry, and her shift ends in two hours.

She tells me to go someplace else, live a little more, maybe go down to the beach, but I remind her I’m hungry, and she shoves a menu in my hand. Says a table over there is free, if I want it. So, I sit down to eat.

The server carries out my meal, sets it down in front of me, and I do my best to thank her, though I can see all she did was walk without dropping things. She’s tacky, but likely she’s settled down, found a man eager enough to settle for her too – maybe there’s some screaming child on the way, too.

The chips are warm, but nowhere near hot. I shouldn’t complain so much, not in this town, not in this whole wide world, but there are things we may as well shit on daily. Our food, for one. Our world. The people that make us squirm. Chips two meals in a row. But that was my choice, I guess, and I didn’t say any different. Sometimes I complain about her. My sister.

I bite into a square of the chicken schnitzel as Heidi moves from counter to counter, smiling at an older woman, maybe in her sixties. She’s wearing a loose-fitting dress, and sandals. She looks almost out of place, but no one notices her as otherwise. They smile at her, and wave, and Heidi hands her a glass of something, maybe cider. The older woman sighs, taking a sip.

I’d been focused too much on watching this woman blend in so seamlessly, and on eating. I duck my head down, glancing at the plate in front of me. I’ve barely touched my food. Someone cheers from another part of the tavern – the gaming area. She’s won something, but when others rush to see, it’s measly – she isn’t the grand champ. The atmosphere in this place is chill enough. Enough to forget where you come from, even just for an hour or so. I bite into another chip. They’re getting colder; soggier.

...

I meet her outside, in the parking lot. She wants me to tear off her clothes, right here and now.

I’ve booked the motel room by now, did so in the hour I had left to wait for her. She follows me to my car, parked a few spaces away from the front entrance of the tavern. She hops into the passenger seat – sitting there, she looks perfectly in place, born to be there, almost. But she shrugs that off, as if she knows herself not, and unties her ponytail.

When we enter the room, she kicks off her shoes, glancing away as they bounce towards the wall. I close the door behind her. The motel room is dingy. It smells off, almost an abandoned place, in the emotional sense. But what do I know about abandoned?

Heidi doesn’t want us to sit around for an hour or so watching something on the television, and after all neither do I. The television is small and only has the free-to-view channels anyway. She leans in as I kiss her, parting her lips, as my tongue searches in darkness for hers. I take off my shirt, up over my shoulders. Cut past the small talk and the blah blah of a date – she’s unzipping my pants, trying to pull them down while we kiss. I lift her uniform top over her head.

She has my pants around my ankles. She's slipped out of her pants, tossed them towards the shitty television. She stares at my underwear – it's grey, it hides what she wants. Barely.

She tears them down; it flops out, she grins, taking it in her mouth. We skipped past the boring stuff, like what you do for fun, or where I came from. She's working her mouth around it, because she's done it before – of course she has. Violet didn't know how to do things like this. But you could tell her to smile, sit pretty and she'd enjoy it.

Soon enough, she grows tired of sucking me off, and we move to the bed. The mattress is comfortable enough to fall on, less so than the bed-and-breakfast. I'm on top of her. She kisses passionately, craving for me, craving for my attention. Like I want her to.

I unstrap her bra, pull down her panties, kiss near her waist. Softer, there. We're a flurry of nakedness, bareness, and she kisses my neck, she wants to leave a memento I'll remember. I want to be inside her. And she'll let me – she's staring at me now, pulling away from my neck, and she nods, the slightest of nods. I catch it, in that moment.

She moans. I remember the little smirk when I asked her what she planned on doing tonight. She leans into me – the art of sex, the art of playful kisses and inhibitions stripped back, stripped bare, us here in this dingy motel room bare. Bearing down on each other. She kisses me again, and I feel her world, how little it is without this here, how much pleasure she feels. She moans again.

I explode inside her, a little while after. She doesn't react at first, her eyes closed, and then she lets out a sigh, a sigh that can only be translated to two words: fuck yeah. Then it all ends. She leaps up, cleaning herself up, and heads for the bathroom. For the shower that couldn't fit two, even if you tried to cram in. She's left her clothes scattered around the room, at least.

I lie there naked for a while. While she showers. I stare up at the ceiling. It's freeing, all this.

Freeing to feel wanted. But then only for one night.

She crashes down onto the bed after her shower and falls asleep. Laying there, she looks the same she did in the tavern – intriguing, if she spoke, but almost lifeless otherwise. I stare at her, because she's there beside me, chest rising and falling. Lying on her side. Her brown hair falling down around her oval face. She is still beautiful, in her sleep.

My phone rings sometime later. I slept for a while, maybe, or maybe not. The moon still hangs in the sky, and the girl beside me still lies, fast asleep. My phone still rings. I clamber out of bed, grabbing it and heading into the bathroom. I answer, mumbling into it.

"Hello?"

It's her – I know her voice. I heard it late at night, and in the mornings, and I heard it outside my door, softer, because she thought I would be still sleeping. She found my number.

"I want you to know that you didn't break me, Kian," she mutters out, and it sounds untrue, almost. Her voice wavers. She's had something to drink, maybe. "I want you to know that you didn't steal everything."

I never stole from her. She found my number. Maybe she stole that.

I listen to her breathing, to hear for the bumps and lumps inside, the bruises I must have left on her fragile skin. She wants me to know everything, and then know nothing more. I lean back against the wall of the bathroom – I'm waking up, bit more.

"How the fuck did you get my number?"

I can hear her pause, her distance from me, but she's there, calming herself down or taking one more breath, before she spills out again. "I don't know an awful lot," she says, pausing for that singular moment, when you build for the end, "but I know you haven't broken me."

She hangs up.

I'm sitting down outside the motel room, staring up at the night sky, the prettiness of it.

She shouldn't have called. To hear her voice, I thought of my sister again, because we'd talked about her too. I almost told her all that happened. I'd stopped myself, then.

Heidi's still sleeping inside. She wouldn't have heard the call, or else she wouldn't have known what it was about. I stumble to my feet, opening the room door again. I stumble inside. It's darker again. I block her number, staring amidst the glow, and drop my phone down into the bedside drawer. She doesn't stir when I climb back beside her, scooting closer and closer. I fall asleep watching her chest again, rise and fall, rise and fall.

...

In the morning, she whispers a goodbye and she wanders off, somewhere outside, somewhere I'll never see her again. Heidi enters and exits my life as quick as most women do.

My mother and sister are exceptions, and so was Violet. But I said goodbye the moment I could, without hesitation. Because it was the unspoken tradition. Women drift away from me, when they can. Women are always so unsure of me.

Izzie isn't, or doesn't seem to be. I close up the motel room, carrying my things with me. Izzie likes the window seat in cars, and on planes, trains, buses, you name it. She likes, or liked, staring out at whatever lurks outside, be it as normal as the next thing, or as extraordinary as, say, someone's kid chasing after a balloon let loose, or a cow almost too close to another cow, back then we'd had such weird concepts of what *extraordinary* was. In the past few years, there hadn't been many family trips, so the window seats were emptied. Izzie would stare out them on the way to school, but all she would see would be the side of the road. Maybe another traveller, who knows.

I pack up and leave behind Wagner Bay, the miserableness of it a stain on my sleeve. I realise that now, how bleak of a town it is, even with the lust rumbling from within it. Like a trailer park hooker. Behind me, it doesn't bother waving. I wasn't anything more than a papercut.

On the drive to the next town over, I flick through the stations. An awkward country song flickers into life, and then fizzles to be replaced with a boring and bored radio host announcing to the tiny world that will listen that he had a burrito for lunch. The next station, something opera, and then another host, their muffled voice droning. Then comes a station I can tolerate. It's a song from the 80s, something I probably found rifling through Dad's old albums. I've forgotten the lyrics, and the title, so it floats in my mind and throughout the car, heard from afar and yet erewhile becoming putty to be moulded, by my ears.

Hinkston Head, from the moment you drive in, appears more welcoming than the other town. More relaxed, more freed. The pub is the shadiest resort for fun along the front strip, and even then, the pub itself is half bar, half hotel, which limits how rowdy it can get late at night. I pull into its carpark, turning off the engine. Sit there for a moment, staring down at my phone, with a missed call from Mum. She wouldn't talk about Izzie, if I called her back. So, I let her sit somewhere in my mind.

There's a family spending the hours of sunlight by the shore, and they look content, content to do almost nothing and have it feel like something. The kid, the little boy, builds a sandcastle with his older sister, but she's staring at a seagull – it stares back, or at least it seems to. She spooks it. The gull flies off, but the boy hadn't noticed anything – he was still building, content with that. I shouldn't be staring at this family. Almost makes me miss home.

I hang around the beach for a few hours, getting something to eat about halfway through. The family left about an hour ago, off to their beachfront rental or their car, off wherever they want to be. Replaced by other families, and other smiling faces. I've been sitting here, just sitting, sometimes staring at my

phone, and letting the world drift on by without me. I walked in the water, some time ago, getting my toes wet and the sand everywhere. Among the beauty and the aesthetic of this town, I feel like I've always left something in the car.

There is a general store in town, a corner store not on the corner of anything, boxed in between a butcher and a bakery. I'm inside, wandering the aisles, stocking up the green plastic basket, when I hear a voice in my ear.

"Can I help you at all, sir?" His voice is rubbery, but warm; welcoming. He'd startled me, though, so I turn around to face him, throw a smile from cheek to cheek. Polite.

"I think I'm managing," but I can tell from the way he approached me that he's getting bored, and lonely, without many customers today no doubt.

He smiles, "You're not from around here?"

His question is almost a statement, as if he remembers every face, and he's never once seen mine. "I'm not," I say, scooping up a bottle of tomato sauce from the shelf, "I'm on holidays, stopping in here for a few days." It's so pretty here, why not? I should have the money.

He gives me a look, not of lost hope or misfortune, but because he likes that I'm staying, I'd think – his smile is genuine, above all else. "I hope you like it here –"

"Kian," and I go to shake his outstretched hand, and his smile is warmer still.

He says his name is Graham, and that he owns this general store, and has for the last few years. The previous owner was old, a dinosaur of a man, and fell down and died one day. Just like that. Graham helped me find something hidden in an aisle towards the back, and I paid at the front, and he waved me off. I start to head back to the beach.

I lie awake now, staring at the ceiling. Not anything special about the ceiling. A white ceiling.

I've started thinking about my parents again. About how they wanted us to see the world, but from their eyes, their lenses, because by the time we swapped to the frames we liked, it was almost too far different for them. My parents loved me, no doubt, but free-spiritedness ran too thin, in the scheme of things. Mum and Dad said they would be okay if I was gay, if I wanted to be different, but then why did they shun Izzie when...well, she didn't come out, no.

Dad said once, when we were out on his boat, that if he had a gay son, he'd try his best to help him pick out the hot but decent guys he could find, as if he is friends with a whole bunch of younger gay guys. Maybe he is. Dad said he thought about it, certainly more so in college.

I don't know why I started to think about my parents, lying here in this room, staring at the white ceiling. Maybe it was Graham, telling me life is too short, merely with a look in his eyes. Maybe it was the family on the beach, or the family-less couple strolling by, holding hands, waiting for the world to end. Maybe it just came to me: a thought. *What are my parents up to?*

I keep my eye on something up there, a dot no bigger than what a pencil would leave behind, and I hesitate to switch off the lamp on the bedside. I switch it off, and the little dot fades away into the shadows. The pillows are lumpy, but comfortable enough, and through the years of seeing the world, seeing my parents' world, I got comfortable enough with any old pillow in any old room we'd stay in. It's funny how second-nature moving from room to room is now.

And when I could go home all the while, to a pillow flattened down by my head.

I fall asleep thinking about Izzie, hoping she's okay.

I step inside the store again, after buying something from the bakery next-door – a sausage roll, piping hot, with a squirt of tomato sauce. I ate it sitting there, staring out at the row of cars parked across the road. I'd wished then that the cars could be wiped away for a better view of the ocean, but now it seems to impractical – like asking for mountains to be flattened for more housing. Maybe not so dramatic.

Graham smiles as I walk past him, towards the aisle of fridges and freezers towards the back. I have no use for the larger bottles of milk, or the cartons of eggs, so I buy the small bottles, the snack-sized bottles. I don't have eggs, or I order them when I can, at cafes. A loaf of bread I can keep in the car, until it goes stale.

When I go to pay, Graham asks me a question.

"Are you sure you don't want an ice cream today?" He says, pointing to the freezer beside him, displaying a wide range of different flavours, from vanilla to mint choc-chip, from mango sorbet to specialty rum-and-raisin.

"Yeah okay, I'll have one," I reply, and he smiles, such a genuine smile.

The store is empty and quiet now, as I lick the sides of the ice-cream, before it melts onto my fingers. I'm in the back room with Graham, a room just out of view from the front, and his wife, Thelma, has started her short shift for the day. He says she's semi-retired – she'll work a shift here and there, and then look after the house and their cat when she's home, or she'll knit something for the grandkids. Graham's got his own ice-cream – he chose the rum-and-raisin, I went for two scoops, chocolate and vanilla.

"So where do you come from then, Kian?"

He takes a chunk from his ice-cream, licking his lips.

"I've lived in Watson Heights most of my life, but we used to travel a lot, seeing the sights and stuff like that, I wonder if we ever came here at all." He's nodding, slow.

"With your family then?"

"Yep," I reply, glancing down at the ice-cream for a second, just watching it. "Parents, and my little sister, Izzie." He smiles warmly. "Though she's not so little anymore."

"How old is she then?"

Remembering her age is what always stings Mum and Dad. "She's seventeen now, eighteen next year." Graham's licking his ice-cream, and then he's pausing, now he's stumped.

"Why the sudden change, running off by yourself?" He pauses again, maybe he thinks it isn't his place to ask, or he's overstepped, but he smiles and says, "Just for the ride?"

It's always been more than that. More than running away for a change, more than an escape. But it would always seem like an escape mission. I saved the money, I bought the car, I drove off at the last minute and didn't look back. I only call Izzie sometimes, to make sure she's okay.

"Mum and Dad, they taught me all this travelling stuff, so I saved and set out on my own for god knows what was in store," I say, and it's what I've told anyone who's asked, or some version of that. Makes me seem less of a stupid teenage boy who ran with his heart and his dick instead of his brain. Least I had some plan, some money and a route home, if I ever wanted it.

"If it was something you wanted, and you built yourself up for it, then this should be the time of your life, and you can forget what held you back from it." Graham says this so wisely, so profound of thought, and yet so flippantly too, as he returns to his ice-cream, the rum-and-raisin yellowish beige coating his lips.

We talk for half-an-hour or so, back and forth – he talks about his cat, he named it Griff when they adopted it around three years ago, from a shelter; I talk a bit more about my parents, and Izzie, and I almost slip up, almost tell him about what happened. The reason I left that morning.

He asks me if I have a girlfriend back home, if she misses me while I'm gone.

"I haven't a real relationship since... maybe Year 10, in school."

He chuckles, looking me up and down. "Not attracting the ladies?"

"Not really into the getting attached thing," I reply, popping a stick of gum into my mouth.

He stares at me for a moment, but I can tell he understands, just from the glint in his eyes. “As long as you’re keeping yourself out of trouble, and enjoying yourself...” He gives me a cheeky smile, then glances out the door, hearing his wife call out to him. He says it’s nothing major, just a customer having dropped something, and he hadn’t seen anything dropped.

I tell him Heidi was a better fuck than Violet, because he wanted some insight, or some scandal he could let wash over him, or something. I said, “I met up with a girl a few nights ago, and I enjoyed myself,” I say, softer than usual, eye-contact drifting back and forth, and then, “more so than any other girl recently, to be honest.”

Graham says he doesn’t know how I can compare, how I can look at two *sexual endeavours* and judge which one I liked more; enjoyed more. He says he’s been with his wife, Thelma, since they were younger, in their teens, and back then such a thing as *exploring your options* wasn’t common, or it wasn’t talked about.

It’s a bit strange telling an almost stranger, this older man I met in the store, all about my sex life for the past few days, but I’ve had no one else. I’ll never tell Izzie about any of the girls, and she’s never told me much about the guy. She says she loves him, even still. I don’t know if I can believe much of that, or if he cares much at all.

Graham has to return to work – his wife is off back home, to get everything ready for the grandchildren coming up tomorrow, and to feed the cat. I follow out behind him, say a goodbye, something I’d say if I was seeing him tomorrow, or so shortly after, then walk outside into the sunshine. The sunglasses I bought from a store down the street come in handy.

An hour later, I hop into the driver’s seat and drive off, off towards the horizon.

...

There are a million things on my mind as I cross the bridge, taking one look at the glistening water, imagining the fish swimming down there. I think about how I leave everywhere nowadays without a proper goodbye. I think about how sometimes it doesn’t matter, that I do that. I think about Heidi, and how never seeing her again doesn’t ruin me like not seeing me might’ve ruined Violet. I think about her, Violet, and how the next time she meets someone and thinks she’s fallen in love, she’ll be waiting for him to rush out the door, because that must be how love is. I think about my parents, and Izzie, and how wrong and punishable the world is on them.

But then again, I don’t think about any of this when I cross the bridge. I think about the fish down there in the water, if there are fish, and how they would be swimming for their life, trying their hardest to not get eaten by some bigger, hunkier fish. I’m so different to a fish.

I end up in a side-of-the-road McDonalds, eating a cheeseburger and drinking a coke. I tried calling Izzie half-an-hour ago, but she didn’t answer, and then I remembered why – she’d be at school still. A family stumbles inside – the kids must be taking today off – and they line up to order. One of the kids, the older boy, looks over at me. I smile, the cheesiest smile.

Izzie calls me back a few hours later, so I pull over.

“Hey, Kian, what’s up?” Her voice is soft, quiet, so innocent to hear.

Cars zoom by. “I want to pick you up, take you with me somewhere else,” I say, listening to her breath, her hesitation. I haven’t looked at how much money I have left. But I want her to come. I want her out of their house.

“I wish I could, big bro...” Her voice trails off. I know why she’s speaking softer, I know why she whispers now – she’s probably sitting in the closet, hiding the call from Mum and Dad, who would pound her for answers. Not so literally.

Izzie gave birth not too long ago. She got pregnant when she was sixteen – the father is some older guy from school, they met at a party. She won't tell me his name. Izzie sighs, and we lull in the silence.

"It's a chance for you to forget, Iz –"

But I know she doesn't want to forget. When her son was born, she cried, from the pain, from everything. She didn't want to ever let him go; she didn't ever want to say goodbye. Mum and Dad knew in their hearts, seemingly, that Izzie couldn't raise a child. They wanted Callan to be put up for adoption – she'd named him already, but that couldn't change their mind either.

"I have to stay here, to finish school." Her voice sags.

I let out a sigh. "Then after school finishes? I pick you up..."

If I could see her, I'd picture her shaking her head. Telling me she can't even just with her eyes, the way she looks at me. Her life is in Watson Heights – her life was almost with her baby. I cling more tightly to my phone.

"You just left me here, with them..."

I can hear it in her voice – her melancholia. I sigh. "You know why I left..."

"I don't think I do anymore, Kian."

I fled the scene the moment I could. I did the move of a dickhead. Mum and Dad were overprotective of Izzie, still likely are, and when they told her Callan had another family now, I fled. I got into my car and drove away. I had been planning to.

I wish Izzie had wanted to come with me. She was so sure back then that Mum and Dad would change their minds when they saw how miserable she became. Nothing changed.

I don't know what will happen to her baby, if he has somewhere else to go, or if he's crying out somewhere for her, or if he'll ever smile or giggle again. No one will know.

I like standing at the edge of the world. The cliff-face. I turned the car around, turning away from Izzie, like everyone else has done to her, and like she did to me again today. I turned around and came here, again, to the edge of the world. The cliff. It took the rest of the day to drive, so I stand in darkness, the settling darkness, and I could be like every other protagonist, and scream at the sea, but I don't. I stare into it. I could be looking for something, or nothing at all. I could be here for someone. I could be here to say goodbye, leap over the edge.

I don't know why I'm here. It called for me to come back, to stand at the edge of the world. Even when I know where the shore meets the ocean isn't the edge – it's a new beginning. Running from my family wasn't a new beginning, but I could see it as one.

It was something, and it was nothing.

It was just one more thing I've done to shape this world, to mould it, to move this way and that, to see if it would feel better standing on this foot or that foot.

It was just one more thing I've done.