

## Home

Amy McDonald

Tania's sign was simple. *Canberra*. She didn't need to be poetic, she just needed a lift. Last night, yelling over the phone, she swore she wasn't going. But she'd dreamt of summers and family picnics, surely things from TV, and woke with a list of things to pack already in her head.

The sky had faded indigo to grey but the rain hadn't eased. She was wet through; her jeans clung to her legs. A stream of cars passed too fast to read her sign. She shivered, pulled her scarf tighter around her neck and clawed the denim away from her skin.

Four years ago, Tania had driven herself to Canberra. She couldn't remember much of the drive and had just arrived in time for the funeral. At the service her mother had been hard, cold, like the seat of the pew. Tania mouthed Amazing Grace until her mother's sharp elbow forced her to croak out some sound. What was it the Minister said? A real family man. His giant photo leered from the lid of his coffin.

At the wake it was stuffy. Under instruction Tania pulled sheets of plastic wrap from platters of sandwiches. Beetroot had soaked the bread into spongy pink paste.

In the kitchen, losing strangers offering comfort, Tania found vodka. She sat on the bench and drank it neat from the bottle.

'What are you doing?' Her sister, hissing at the doorway, wore suitable black. 'Why do you always have to be so self-indulgent?'

'Is it really this,' Tania toasted with the bottle, 'that's bothering you?'

'Christ. Not now.'

'What not now?'

'You. Your issues.'

As her sister made quotation marks with her fingers, Tania choked. 'Which issues this time?'

'I don't know, Tania. Dad. All that old stuff. And now her.'

'Yvonne?'

'Mum said it was probably because of him.' Her sister took a step into the kitchen then stopped.

'She knew?'

Nothing.

Spit glimmered at the corner of Tania's mouth. 'Then why didn't she stop him?'

'OK, not now,' her sister had said.

Tania finished the bottle. The floor became unsteady, the black and white checks of the lino morphing fat to thin.

After the guests had left, her mother clattered dishes in the kitchen. Tania watched from the floor, legs spread wide, back against the door of the pantry.

Her mother stacked the last plate in the rack and removed her gloves. She shook them into the sink and said, 'How's...'

'Yvonne, Mum.' Tania tipped the empty bottle on its side and rolled it between the lino and her palm. 'Her name is still Yvonne.'

'Yes. I'm still getting used to it.' She paused, lent closer into the sink. 'Your father. He was an old fashioned man. He thought maybe he'd done something wrong.'

'He did.'

'Tania.'

A child wailed from the street. Tania lifted her head. 'So you think I fuck women because of what he did?' She pushed the bottle harder, rolling it forcefully across the floor.

When it struck her mother's ankle she jerked. 'Why must you do this?'

Tania laughed. 'You know, Mum.'

When her mother turned, her eyes were empty. 'You've had too much to drink.'

The next day, on the drive back to Melbourne Tania had made a promise to herself. She would never go back to Canberra. She would box up everything family and stow it deep in the back of her mind.

Now, standing in the gutter, she imagined herself walking in the front door again, older, changed. A slice of toast and half a cup of black coffee hit the back of her throat and she vomited into the gutter. A car pulled up as she wiped her mouth.

‘So Hon, why Canberra?’ the driver, a middle-aged woman in a red polyester suit, asked. The dusting of dandruff on the woman’s shoulders reminded Tania of strawberries and icing sugar. Sunday dessert, served after a roast, in front of the telly. Eaten before her mother left for dancing.

The woman’s car was new, the back filled with boxes leaking packets of tablets. The spinning wheel of a deodoriser emitted a replicated vanilla scent. A life-sized cardboard marathon runner stretched from the back seat to the dash, his friendly face smiling at Tania.

‘Visiting a sick friend.’

‘Oh, that’s no good.’ The driver drew out the last syllable. ‘You two close?’

Tania stared out the window. ‘Not anymore.’

The driver looked briefly from the road to Tania and back. ‘Unfinished business, then.’ She nodded to herself, knowingly. ‘Tough, that.’ The woman reached behind her and rummaged blindly in an open box. Twisting back she handed Tania a packet. ‘Stress Less. It’s my new line. All herbal.’ She patted Tania’s thigh reassuringly. ‘They’ll give you a bit of pep.’

Tania released two pills from their packet and swallowed them dry. She felt the woman watching.

‘Not married, then?’ She tipped her head towards Tania’s raised hand.

‘No.’

‘Divorced?’

‘No.’

‘Good. I’ve had three.’

‘Husbands?’

‘Yup.’ The woman shifted in her seat, pulling her shoulders back. ‘And divorces.’ She took her eyes from the wet road again and pursed her lips at Tania. ‘Don’t bother with them, Love.’ She flicked her face back to the windscreen. ‘They’re all bastards.’

Tania leaned her head against the cool, damp window. The rhythmic thumping of the wipers was calming. She dozed under the reassuring gaze of the cardboard runner.

‘OK, Hon, that’s it for me.’ The car had stopped. The woman was reapplying her lipstick. It was the colour of rust and smelled metallic, like kisses at the door when her mother left for dancing.

‘Where are we?’ Tania wiped a peephole in the fogged window. Neon flashed through the rain.

‘Glenrowan servo. That do?’

‘Yeah, thanks.’

‘No worries, Hon. I hardly noticed you. Hope you find another lift in this weather.’

Tania smiled and handed back the open packet of pills.

The woman waved them away. ‘Keep those. You’ll need them.’

As Tania stuffed the packet into her bag, the woman said, ‘And I didn’t mean what I said before,’ she touched Tania’s hand, ‘about men. They’re not all bad. You’ll find one.’

Tania got out of the car and headed for the bathroom. In the mirror her eyes were dark, her skin colourless. What her mother would call washed out. She splashed her face with water.

Tania sat on a stack of bagged firewood outside the service station. Next to her, crates of empty soft drink bottles waited to be collected and refilled. Growing up, they’d had those

types of drinks delivered to the house, every second Saturday. Her favourite was the orange flavour. Her sister's the raspberry. Once, they had opened a bottle each and drunk the fizzy so fast it spilled over their chins and soaked into their swimmers. It had been her sister's idea to hide the stolen bottles under the house. But the next Saturday the two empty compartments in the orange crate had led to trouble.

Tania grabbed her sign and bag and walked away from the memory, out into the rain.

The man had the paper tucked under his arm, a chocolate bar in his hand. 'Can get you over the border, how's that?'

Tania nodded and followed his flannelled back. His jeans sagged in the arse; the outline of his wallet was faded a shade lighter.

The car stank of instant coffee and too much time alone. The man threw his paper into the back. Tania got out her mobile. 'Just letting my sister know I got a lift,' she lied. He nodded and angled the rear view mirror down and left.

Tania typed *I'm coming. I'm sorry about last night. Make her hang on* and pressed send.

'So, I'm Pete. Peter.' A chocolate and caramel mass pushed out against the inside of his cheek.

'Tania.'

Peter started the car, the wipers beating over the windscreen. He waved the remaining nub of the chocolate bar in offering. Tania shook her head. They drove.

'Porn capital, Canberra.' Peter swallowed. 'Yep, porn capital. Everything you need is there. Videos, toys, outfits...' He glanced at her. 'Everything.'

Tania focussed on the arcs of water being repelled by the wipers.

Peter drummed the wheel. 'You know what, Tania?'

She watched the right arc of sweeping water overrun the left.

'Today's my birthday.'

'Happy birthday.'

He scratched lightly at his crotch. 'Wanna get in the back for a bit?' His voice stayed casual.

‘No, Peter. Just the lift, thank you.’

‘Got a boyfriend?’

‘No.’

‘Bit weird, pretty girl like you.’

‘I don’t like men,’ she said.

The wipers beat four counts. ‘Lesbo?’

Tania popped another two herbal pills from their plastic.

‘Come on. Just for a bit?’ He leaned over and squeezed Tania’s thigh. ‘Won’t take long.’

The hair on his hands was greying. His fingers were blunt, the nails chewed right down.

She lifted his hand by the cuff of his shirt, dropped it back on his side of the hand brake.

‘No.’

He picked a glob of caramel from a tooth, peered at it and then wiped it on his jeans. ‘So, you girls use those strap on things?’ He shrugged. ‘All leather and rubber and that?’

Tania could smell the wet wool of her jumper. She didn’t answer.

They drove in silence for while. Peter’s forehead was creased. Then: ‘What about a hand job then, while I drive?’

‘No. I just want to go to Canberra.’

‘You sure?’

She answered with a look.

‘Can’t blame a bloke for trying.’ He put his hand back on the wheel. ‘Just all that talk about porn.’

With her eyes half open, Tania said, ‘It’s not really your birthday, is it, Peter?’

‘Nah,’ he said, an embarrassed little boy.

Peter turned up the radio and Tania dozed.

In Albury Tania burnt her mouth on a cup of bad coffee. Her jeans had dried, crusting to her skin. The ink was running off her soggy sign. What would her mother think?

An old van pulled up and the side door slid open. 'Get in,' a girl with dreadlocks leaned out and yelled. 'We're going to Canberra!'

Tania dropped her sign.

Inside the van the air was thick. 'So what do you do when you're not hitching, Tania?' The driver, a boy, had a German accent and a purple bandana.

'I'm an artist. Painter.' She raised her head from the girl's shoulder where she'd left a small, wet dribble mark.

'Cool,' the girl exhaled a green cloud and offered Tania the joint. Her wrist tinkled with a string of tiny bells. 'What do you paint?' She coughed then giggled.

Tania took a slow toke and passed the joint to the front. 'Fathers and daughters.' Through the window she watched the wet forest speed past.

Night settled.

The lost memory found her as her eyes drifted shut. Her final family holiday. They'd driven to the beach, gone camping. It had rained for three days. She remembered mud, cold, fighting. At its worst, in the car on the way home, her mother had leaned over to the driver's seat and whispered, hateful, 'I know what you did to her.' Tania remembered her father pulling the car over and ordering her mother out. She remembered her sister begging until they went back for her. She remembered the silence of the final three hours home.

'So why Canberra?' asked the boy.

'My mum's dying.' Tania said.

'Intense.' The girl drew circles on Tania's thigh with her finger.

'Not anymore.'

The van travelled on through the rain.

The street was lit with reflecting puddles. Through the rain the house lurked, silent and still.

Tania lifted the gate latch.

The front door opened to her sister, red-eyed. ‘You just missed her,’ she said. Tania heaved her soaking bag into the house.

The room was unchanged. Tania sat on the bed. She watched her mother’s face, her skin thin and washed out, her lips almost lavender.

Someone called out from downstairs and Tania reached to close the door. She took her mother’s cooling hand. A wilting bouquet of lilliums sat in a vase of rancid water, their pollen staining the tablecloth in irregular patches. Next to the flowers perched a picture in a frame. The photo was taken at the beach, on that last holiday. Her mother and sister smiled out, each holding dripping icy poles. A younger, freckled Tania sat between them, turned slightly away, her face obscured under a red sun hat. Tania picked up the picture frame to look deeper into her mother’s eyes. She looked drawn, her face stuffed with untold information. Tania held the image closer, but it remained flat, impenetrable. The photo was cropped abruptly short, the rounded edge of the print left a ribbon of white cardboard up one side. Tania unfastened the back of the frame and folded the photo back to its usual size.

The image of her father was darker from being unexposed like the other three. He smiled, cut off from the family by a worn, white crease. Tania’s throat stung, burned. She pressed the edges of the frame into her palms.

The rain beat on the window.

‘Home’ was first published in ‘BanQuet’ (BanQuet Press, 2009)