

POINTS OF DEPARTURE



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by Emily O'Beirne



Characters

Liza

After realising that being an athlete might not be for her, Liza's just broken it to her parents that she wants to quit running. And that she's pretty sure she's gay. And now she's leaving the country. On this trip, Liza's hoping to figure out what her new life without running could be like. And maybe she'd like to meet a girl who actually likes her for a change. She just didn't plan on doing any of this without Kit by her side.

Kit

It was Kit's idea to take this trip. But hapless, charming, and a known walking disaster sometimes, Kit has yet again failed to follow through on one of her plans. Now, instead of going on this dream holiday with her friends, Kit's forced to stay home and work through her summer holidays in Melbourne. Then there's that small problem of finding a life plan...

Olivia

Olivia always thought she had her life mapped out. There's the plan to study law, there's the friends she's taking to uni with her, and there's a relationship with a guy who is as much like a best friend as a boyfriend. But after a disastrous break-up and an exam meltdown, Olivia's forced to confront the fact that maybe she's been mindlessly following the paths that she thought she was supposed to, not the ones she really wants.

Tam

Tam's had a rough year trying to get through Year 12 and her father's illness. Her desire to be a chef takes her on this trip to learn more about food and to see the world, but can she do that when homesickness and worry about her father are making it hard to enjoy herself? Then there's also the added complication of what happened with Matt before she left.

CHAPTER 1

Liza, Melbourne

She stops at the lights and fights to catch her breath. Cars, trams, and cyclists speed past, fighting it out for space in the busy intersection. Liza shakes her legs to loosen her calves. She could feel their tightness as she ran down the street, flinching each time her feet slapped the hot concrete. Just a few days off training, and she's already lost fitness. How does it happen so fast?

The sun beats hotly on her shoulders, the first proper summery day of the year. There's not even time for the sweat to settle on the surface of her skin before it evaporates under the glare. And it's only late November. If she weren't about to leave, she'd have to start putting on sunscreen before she runs. And she'd still come out of summer an even darker burnished brown.

As she waits for the lights to go her way, she gazes idly along the street. The tables outside cafes are full of people delaying the inevitable, pretending with coffee and leftover news from the weekend that it isn't Monday. And it hits her all over again. She's no longer required to care if it's Monday. School is done. A thrill shoots through her. VCE, her taskmaster, the fire-breathing beast that made her stomach ache and her breath catch every time she thought about the pile of study in front of her for the last eight months, is slain. Now she's free for three whole months until uni begins. It's surreal.

Lunging, she eases her legs into a stronger stretch. The pedestrians around her have made their Monday effort, and perfume and aftershave form a fragrant cloud around the haircuts and self-conscious styled-to-casual outfits. Liza is suddenly hyperaware of her uniform of sloppy singlet and shorts. She can't remember a day in the last six years that hasn't started with her dressed like this. And she can't imagine a day that doesn't start without the head-clearing ritual of a run.

Finally, it's their turn. She steps out onto the road with a light jog, breaking ahead of the crowds. Once she's cleared them, she slows back to a walk, passing a line of tiny single terrace houses in varying shades

of decrepit and gentrified. There's no sign of life at Kit's house, a flaking pastel pink place. The gate's shut, for once, and an electric blue piece of fabric shrouds the dusty glass of the darkened front room.

The house next door, the better-looking twin, is equally quiet. Its manicured garden and fresh paint job seem to mock the fetid wheelie bins and straggling hedge outside Kit's. A poster boy for gentrification.

There's something different about the posh house today, though. It takes her a moment to work it out. Then it hits her. The cherub statue in the front yard, a chubby nude boy with a grimace of a smile, is gone. He's usually balanced creepily astride the rim of the stone birdbath. How many times have they mocked that stupid, kitschy thing? Now only some stubby stone legs remain, planted stubbornly on the chipped bowl. Maybe Kit will know what happened.

As instructed by the text message, she doesn't stop at Kit's. Instead, she continues to the pub two doors down, a dark blue brick heap on the corner. There's no sign of life there either. She peers through the glass doors, but all she can see in the light that manages to penetrate the filthy windows is the shadowy outlines of bar stools and a pool table. She stands back and contemplates the place, dubious. Why can't they just meet at Kit's house? Or at a café, like normal people? Nope, Kit wants to meet at the pub. At what could only be considered brunch time, at a push.

She tentatively tests the door. It's open. It falls closed behind her with a clatter. She's instantly assaulted by the reek of beer and sweat and something else that manages to be both sweet *and* sour. And definitely alcoholic. It's the kind of smell you could probably get a contact hangover from if you're not careful.

A male voice yells from somewhere. "I'll be out in a sec!"

The good news is that the air conditioning is on. As she crosses to the bar, she can feel the slight stickiness of the tiled floor under her runners. She tentatively hauls herself onto a bar stool, takes out her phone, and types the standard daily *where the hell are you* message.

Cooled now, she unties her hair and lets the curls explode around her face. Then, resigning herself to the inevitable Wait for Kit Time, she leans her elbows on the bar. But, feeling that same sticky sensation as on the floor, she removes them just as quickly. She folds her hands

primly in her lap instead and wonders just how many hours of her life she has spent waiting for her best friend to show up.

As if Kit knows exactly what she's thinking, her phone buzzes with a message. *Two mins. Promise!*

Liza sighs. The quiet in the pub is suddenly broken by a loud bang and the rattle of glass coming close to breaking but not, followed by a string of curses. A tall boy emerges from a door behind the bar, rubbing his hands on his jeans.

"Hey, can I...help you?" he asks. But he already sounds doubtful about it. He combs his fingers through his greasy hair and frowns. "Sorry for the wait. I was expecting you to be the beer delivery guy."

"Uh, no, I'm just waiting for...Kit." She points in the vague direction of Kit's house.

"Oh, sure." He picks up a cloth and vigorously wipes the bar in front of her. "She usually surfaces around now. You want coffee?"

"Uh, yeah, that would be great."

"Alright. I'll just wait for Kit too. She's bound to need it," he says. He disappears again.

Ten minutes later, the pub door finally opens. The roar of traffic pours in along with Kit. She's dressed in a pair of jeans that clearly aren't hers, given the way they hang off her hips. The upper half of her small frame is wrapped in a huge hoodie despite the gathering heat outside. Her long, bleached-blond hair hangs down her back.

She launches herself across the room and throws her arms around Liza, nearly knocking her from her stool. "Hi! I *missed* you."

"I missed you too." Liza returns the squeeze and smiles. She can smell Kit's perfume and second hand cigarettes and something else that she can't quite pick.

"How was training camp?"

"It was okay." And that's all it was. Okay. The whole time, Liza had kept trying to make it special by reminding herself that it might be her last. But it didn't work. It just continued to be the same as it had always been, with the added complication of avoiding Alika, of course. But she doesn't want to talk about any of that right now. "Nice spot you've picked for a morning coffee."

Kit grins and shrugs. She takes one of the spare elastic bands wrapped around Liza's wrist and wraps her hair into a messy ponytail.

There's still a panda swipe of yesterday's make-up under her eyes. Liza automatically reaches out and swipes it away.

Flinching, Kit submits. "The coffee is *good*, though. And it's usually free," she whispers. "And believe me, I need free."

"Hey Kit Kat." The guy behind the bar is back.

"Hey, Ollie. Meet Liza, my best friend in the entire world." Kit kneels on her stool and kisses him exuberantly on the cheek before settling back into her seat.

Liza smiles her greeting, but she's really smiling at Kit. Because Kit's been announcing her in that same proud, possessive way since Grade 3, when they first met and consolidated their relationship on the edge of the netball courts. It was a friendship born from a mutual hatred of a sport. And it's a friendship that's lasted them a decade.

"Coffee?" Ollie pats the machine.

"Yes, please." Kit mumbles through an emphatic yawn. "Two flat whites, please."

He nods and pulls a carton of milk from the bottom of the beer fridge. "You working tonight?"

"Yep."

"What? Here?" Liza asks.

Kit nods and runs her fingers in small circles on the bar.

"When did you start working here?"

"Friday."

"But why? When there are only a couple of weeks before we go?"

Kit doesn't answer straight away. Just keeps making relentless, useless circles on the sticky wood. Finally, she looks up. "That's why I needed to see you."

"*What?*" Liza is instantly wary. Because Kit's got her shame face on. And when Kit's got that face on, it means she's usually made some kind of mess of something. "What's going on?"

"Oh, Lize." Kit drops her head onto her arms on the bar and lets out a loud moan. "I messed up."

"How?"

Ollie slides two coffees and a jar of sugar over to them and makes a rapid exit.

"Kit, what's happened?" Liza pulls at Kit's sleeve. "Tell me."

Kit finally lifts her head an inch to say, "I can't come overseas."

"What? What do you mean?"

She shakes her head and mumbles. "I've got no money."

"Yes you do. You've got all your savings from the café."

"I don't anymore."

Liza's so slack-jawed from this new bit of information, it takes her a minute to muster the question. "What happened?"

Kit turns and rests her cheek on her arms. "Well, first, Liam and I broke up. He's moved back to his parents' and left me with all the rent for this month and next."

"So he continues to be a selfish prick, then."

"Uh-huh." Kit sighs loudly. "Who said it was a good idea to move in with him?"

"Definitely not me. But that can't be all your savings?"

"No. But that's not all. You know how we had that party for the end of exams?"

Liza nods. She missed it because of training camp. Just like she's missed everything. "Yeah?"

"Well, the place got kind of trashed, and we also have to pay for some damage to the neighbour's yard."

"Not that creepy cherub fountain?"

Kit lifts her head. "How'd you know?"

If Liza didn't want to cry, she'd probably laugh. "Saw it when I came past. It's demolished." Nope, she has to laugh.

Kit buries her face in her arms again. "Don't laugh. That freaking monstrosity is worth thousands of bucks, apparently. Thousands that me and the boys now have to pay, and pay now or sooner because that stuck-up couple that live there are like, second cousins of our landlord or something. And there goes my savings."

This is a lot of new information to compute, and Liza quickly gives up trying to make sense of it. All she knows is that Kit is saying she can't come overseas any more. Trust Kit to drop a bomb like this only a week or two before their trip. "You *really* can't afford it?" she asks.

"I *really* can't afford it."

Liza sighs. "How do you always find yourself in the middle of these shit storms?"

"I have no idea." Kit drops her chin on her arms again and moans. "So now I'm going to be moving into Mum and Darren's and working my ass off until I can pay back the rest of the money instead."

"But you already have a ticket." Liza refuses to believe this happening, despite that sick feeling in her stomach telling her otherwise.

"Yeah, but I have no money for anything else, like food, accommodation, getting around. I'm going to see if I can refund it and put it on the debt."

Liza only committed to this trip because it was Kit's idea. Now what?

She stares at Kit as she slowly stirs her coffee, looking morose and ashamed. She feels terrible for her, but she also can't help feel a prickle of resentment at Kit's typical shambolic life. Why did she ever believe Kit could actually follow through with this? It goes against everything she's ever known about her best friend. Six years of high school, and Kit barely managed to make it to a class on time. How was she ever going to get on a plane to Europe? To the airport, even?

"Our trip," she says mournfully.

"I know. I'm so sorry, Lize."

Liza doesn't reply. She can't. Because she's still not sure if she's going to cry or get really, really angry. And she doesn't really want to do either.

"You'll still have an amazing time with the others," Kit says hopefully.

"I can't go on this trip without you. I barely know those girls."

"You went to school with Olivia and Mai."

"Yeah, and I said more to them those couple of times we had coffee to plan the trip than I have in six years of school."

"You know Tam."

"I haven't seen your cousin in, like, three years, Kit." She sighs and knots her fingers together. "This is going to be so awkward."

"It'll be totally fine once you get to know everyone," Kit tells her. "Olivia's awesome, and Mai's hilarious." She nudges Liza. "You're always super shy until you get to know people. You would have felt that way even if I *was* there, you know."

That's supposed to make her feel better? Liza sips her coffee instead of speaking. Because it's getting harder and harder not to get mad.

Kit clutches the edge of the bar and moans softly again. "Oh God, I'm so depressed now. I cannot believe I can't go."

“Me either,” Liza says, bitter.

“I’m so sorry I really am. I’m a giant fucking idiot.”

“It’s okay,” Liza replies. It’s not really. But it’s not as if Kit’s going to be having a great time, either. She’s going to have it just as bad, stuck in Melbourne in the heat, working in this stinking bar. It’s not the summer either of them envisioned.

They sit there in silence, each locked in their individual post-Kit-trauma misery. Liza wonders for a second if she could find a way to get out of this trip. Because does she really want to do this without Kit? But then she thinks of all the work, school, and training she’s missed for this. All those Sundays she spent working at the shop so she could take this holiday.

And she has to do this anyway. Because she promised herself this trip would be all part of her grand getting-a-life plan before she starts uni.

“I’m sorry,” Kit says again, clearly taking Liza’s silence for anger.

“I know,” she says slowly and wraps an arm around her friend’s shoulder. “So did you tell the others?”

“I called Tam last night. And I’m seeing Olivia later.”

“How did Tam take it?”

“Kind of furious at first.”

Liza’s not surprised. She remembers Tam as nice, but kind of stern and forthright, too—so different than her scatty, sociable cousin.

“So, how are the parentals holding up?”

“They’re okay. They’re being kind of quiet about it all.”

“They’re just taking their time. You did drop two bombs on them at once.”

Liza nods. She kind of did. And now they’re being quiet and careful with her. It’s weird.

“And now you’re fleeing the country. Classy, Lize. Who gets to do that?” She grins.

“Lucky me, huh?”

“Lucky you.” Kit frowns and drops her chin on her hands again.

“They want you to come over soon. They miss you.”

“Of course they do. I’m not working tomorrow?”

“Cool. Come for lunch. No, dinner.”

Kit narrows her eyes at her. "You don't trust me to make it by lunchtime, do you?"

"Maybe." Liza grins at her.

Ollie comes out from the backroom, hugging a small ginger cat to his chest. "Hey Kit, meet Otis, the new pub cat. He's been hanging out in the back lane all hungry and sad. So we started feeding him."

Kit just stares at the cat. Then she drops her face onto her arms again and lets out a long loud moan.

"What's up?" Ollie asks as he rubs the cat's face with his own.

"That's *our* cat," Kit mumbles despondently as she looks up at it. "That's Pip. I haven't seen him for a week."

Leaning in closer, Liza does recognise the scrawny thing from Kit's crazy share house.

Kit lifts her head and drops it back on her arms. "Oh God, what is wrong with me? Of *course* I can't get my shit together to go on a holiday. I can't even keep a freaking cat!"

"Oh, Kit." Liza rubs her friend's back and tries not to laugh. "I have got to go." She slips off the stool, pulls a note from her pocket, and holds it out to Ollie. He just continues to croon at the cat like it's a child and waves the money away. Liza smiles her thanks and runs her hand over Kit's tangle of blonde ponytail. "Sunday dinner, okay? Promise you'll be there?"

"I'll be there." Kit turns and wraps her arms around her briefly. "Promise. Tell your dad to record the cricket for me."

"Okay, weirdo." Liza laughs. "Bye."

CHAPTER 2

Tam, Tasmania

She steps onto the porch, the wind catching her hair immediately, blowing it over her face. Her father is out there already, pulling on his boots.

“Hey.” She leans on a post and watches him drive his feet into the embattled leather.

“Hi there.” He stamps a few times on the dusty wood. “How’s the preparations?”

Tam shrugs. They bought her backpack yesterday from one of the camping stores in town. Now she has to figure out what to put in it. Packing’s still a bit of a mystery. After a couple of pairs of jeans, some tops, a jacket, toiletries and her new super-small travel laptop, there’s going to be a lot of space left. What else, she wonders?

“Can’t help you there, Tamo,” He takes a hat from the hook and pulls it over the stubble of regrowth on his scalp. The sun is burning fiercely. It’s hard to believe it was raining sideways an hour ago. “Ask one of the aunts.” His soles grind against the gravel as he steps off the porch. “One of them’ll be able to tell you.”

“Yeah.” She’ll ask Anita.

“Not long now.”

“Yep.” That’s all Tam can think of to say to that. She suspects she’s supposed to be more excited.

A few weeks ago that feeling she’d get when she thought about this trip was just a small tingle, a bubbling sensation in her chest—like swallowing a huge mouthful of cheap champagne. Like her blood seeming to hesitate for a moment in its journey around her body. But now, so close to leaving, the feeling has become a stiff bristled brush, scouring out the insides of her chest. It’s as if her entire being balks at the prospect of being absent from this place for so long. She knows it’s fear. How can she leave her dad? It feels way too soon, no matter what the doctors say.

He picks up the shovel and a bucket and straightens his back slowly as if it hurts a little.

“You okay?” she immediately asks, scrutinising him.

“Matt’s coming,” he replies instead. With a nod in the direction of the road, he begins his slow march down to the sheds.

Tam squints up the hill. Yep, there he is, loping down the road, hands jammed in his pockets. And although she can’t make it out from here, she can picture the thin, white cord of Matt’s headphones under his hoodie, winding from his ear to wherever it is he secretes that device so that no one ever knows he’s always only ever half-present. The other half of him is always, inexorably, given to sound.

She yanks on her boots, not bothering to tie the laces. Dodging past the sweep of prickly grevillea, she parks herself on one of the flat rocks that border the driveway, and waits.

She watches him weave around the ever-expanding potholes on the surface of the road. The whole road needs grading, but the council doesn’t care about a road that is populated by a handful of houses. No tourists ever come this way. Why should they care about this private, green valley—one of the few places on this whole peninsula tucked so far inland that you can’t even feel the proximity of the coast?

He takes his time getting to her. She’s only ever seen him move faster than a walk twice. The first time was a school sports day, when the PE teacher threatened to fail any kid who didn’t take part in at least one event. Tam chose the 100-metre sprint. Short and sweet. From her position at the starting line, she watched him jog slowly towards the high jump mat, gathering a little speed before taking off, attempting a Frosbee flop like a professional athlete. But weighed down by his boots, he hit the pole on the way over. Still, he clambered to his feet and raised his fist in a victory salute, as if he’d just wiped out an Olympic record, the headphones still jammed in his ears. She stood there on the other side of the oval in her ancient sneakers and laughed, almost missing the start of her own race.

The second time was after he moved here. He’d been living with his mum in one of the rough, elemental towns out west. But, worried that the tiny school in the nearest town over there wasn’t getting him anywhere, she’d sent him here to do his final year of high school. He moved in with his uncle, a grizzled, silent logger who lived up the hill from Tam in an ornate gingerbread wooden cottage he’d built himself.

It was late, and darkness had fallen in that utterly complete way it does in this part of the world. They were driving back from an afternoon of fishing, bundled in Nick's truck, sharing a steaming bag of potato cakes, crisp and golden from the deep fryer. That's when they heard the thunk against the car tire and saw the dark shape skitter onto the shoulder of the road.

"Stop." It was one of the first things Matt had said all day.

"Nah. Just a wallaby," Nick said, and kept his foot on the pedal. Tam didn't react either. Road kill is a fact of life in this part of the world where, after sunset, roads are just long stretches of impossible darkness, lit up only by the high beams of the occasional passing car. The endless parade of wildlife coming and going across the highway can make it feel like peak hour, though. And no kid who lives around here even blinks at the bloodied animal corpses that litter the road or at the fetid smell of rotting flesh that washes through car windows in summer.

But Matt did. "Stop," he said again. "Wombat."

Nick clicked his tongue but stopped. Kicking the car into reverse, he took it part way up the hill again.

Matt already had his hand on the door handle. "Torch?"

"Under the seat."

Matt jumped out of the car. Intrigued by this tall interloper who had performed the miracle that is getting Nick to do anything he doesn't want to do, Tam stared out the back window. His dark outline tramped up the short stretch of road, the beam of the torch leading the zigzagging way. A moment later, he was jogging back to the car with that same loping run. Saying nothing to Nick, he lifted the canvas cover of the ute, rooted around until he pulled out the rifle, and ran back up the road. The shot fired out into the darkness. Tam blinked. Claire jumped and then giggled in the front seat. Nick just clicked his tongue again.

Nobody said a word as they drove the last kilometres back to the intersection, and Nick and Claire let them out at the bottom of the road.

As they trudged back up through the mud to their houses, Tam asked him why he did it. He told her what he knew about wombats, about their bone-tough hides, built for protecting them against predators attacking from behind in their burrows. About how because of this toughness, if you hit them from behind in their car, they took ages to die, sometimes

with young in their pouches. Every now and then Tam took her eyes from the treacherous, potted road and watched him talk under the weak moonlight. She wondered why he didn't mind being seen caring about another dead animal on the road. Most guys around here wouldn't dare.

He finally makes it to her. Tam stands and smiles into the cold breeze that whips down the hill. His return smile is crooked and casual. Wordlessly, they trudge back down the driveway and up the hill, pushing between the damp clumps of salvia bushes, to the small ridge above the orchard. Her father had planned a rock garden there, but then they found the lump, so he never got further than hauling rocks from the back paddock and dumping them in a haphazard pile. Now the only thing growing around them is the long grass that pushes cheekily out of crevices where the mower can't reach.

They settle on the rocks, facing the sweep of green hillside specked with cattle and patches of mud. Sometimes, on good days when they've got time to spare, they climb right up the big hill behind Matt's place. In good weather, they can see the relentless beat of waves pounding along the craggy, shipwrecking cliffs, and the way the coast bears down on them from all sides of this peninsula.

Tam can feel the damp under her backside, but she doesn't care. It's just part of living here. Fat drops of water plunge from the giant pines from the rain earlier. Drops so big, Tam can hear them hit the grass below.

Matt pulls the buds from his ears. Tam can never help feeling a little bit honoured that she's one of the few people he'll take them out for.

"So, when do you go?"

"Next week." Why doesn't he know that?

"You ready?"

She sighs. "If by ready you mean packed, then no. If you mean ready to leave Dad, then no."

With a grin, he leans against a rock and slides his tobacco pouch from his pocket.

She snaps a twig from the bay tree, breaking it into tiny pieces. "If you mean ready to travel with three people I barely know now that Kit has bailed, then no." She tucks her chin onto her knees. "Bloody Kit."

"Right then." He chuckles. "Not ready."

“Have you figured out what you’re going to do for the summer?” she asks, just to get them off the subject of her own plans. She can’t think about it too much, because that panicked, scouring feeling comes back.

He shrugs lazily, his fingers deftly rolling up a skinny cigarette. “I thought about doing the mines for the summer. Mum’s boyfriend said he can get me a job driving the trucks. Eight-hour shifts driving 30 k per hour in and out the mine all day.”

“Sounds thrilling.”

“It does when you hear the pay.” He lights the cigarette. “Enough to get up north.”

She nods. Matt wants to see the desert. He craves the dry, utter opposite of here. Wants to replace the cool, green greys of eucalypts and the restless ocean with the violent red palette of the desert. Just for a while.

“But then your Dad said I could probably work with him in the orchards, so I don’t know.”

Tam feels a small bubble of hope in her chest. If he stayed, he could tell her if anything was wrong. If Dad started to look sick again. She knows her father won’t tell her anything. Especially not after he worked so hard to convince her to go on this trip in the first place. “Which do you think you’ll do?”

“Dunno. Probably stay here. The mines are better for the cash, but there’s shit-all else to do out there.”

“You’ll tell me if Dad’s all right?” She doesn’t look at him. “While I’m gone?”

“Of course.” He turns and smiles his slow, lopsided smile, his shoulder-length brown hair whipping around his ears in the wind. He leans back on his elbows and stares up at the endless sky.

A small rush of relief floods through her as her gaze follows his up to the clouds torn ragged by the wild winds. “Thanks,” she mumbles.

CHAPTER 3

Olivia, Melbourne

Her phone lights up on the table. It's Mai again. Olivia doesn't pick it up. It'll be yet another excited question about what to take, or how they're going to organise everything. Olivia's misery can't deal with Mai's excitement right now. She tucks her phone into her pocket, where she can't see it, and rests her chin on her hands.

She watches her mother push the last few mouthfuls of food around her plate, finally sated. Her mother has always eaten the same way, hungrily and rapidly, not stopping to savour flavours. It's like taste has no bearing on the meal at all.

Which is probably why she likes this buzzing hippie co-op with its colourless, monkish, organic, biodynamic, gluten-free, sugar-free, fun-free meals. The food might be unsullied from the evils of capitalist mass food production, but it's also completely flavourless. Olivia has barely touched hers. Not that she's in the mood to eat.

Even last night's meal didn't tempt her. It's hard to believe only sixteen hours ago she was eating at some ridiculous yuppie restaurant in The Rocks in Sydney, where one tiny artful entree probably cost her father more than her and her mother's meals added together. An expensive dinner to soften the blow of telling her he's moving to Shanghai to marry his girlfriend. The marriage she is happy about. The Shanghai part not so much. And now she is here eating half-cooked grains in this hippie den with her mother. Even though her mother could easily afford to eat in upscale restaurants for every meal if she wanted to. Such is Olivia's world, spread between the discordant lives of her parents. She cannot imagine what it would have been like when they actually used to share a life. That happened before her memories start.

Her mother drops her fork onto her empty plate, done, and brushes her newly bobbed hair behind her ears. Attracted to serviceable knits and wary of make-up, her mother has never cared how she looked. Not in Olivia's memory, anyway. There's proof she did once, though. Olivia thinks of that ancient promotional photo of her mother with her

scruffy blonde Stevie Nicks hair and that floaty black dress. The one the papers always use when they reminisced about the bohemian *Lowlands* days. But if there wasn't photographic evidence, Olivia could never have imagined her mother once dressed like that.

Ruth folds her arms on the table in front of her plate, scrutinising her. "Are you sure your exams went that badly?"

Olivia blinks at the instant prick of tears. "I'm positive. I completely choked on the last two." She really did. She just sat there, muddled and panicked, and wrote barely formed answers to things she knew only weeks ago. And now there is no way she's getting into law. Not at the uni she wants, anyway.

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know." Olivia rests her cheek on her hands and stares out the window. This is such a typical question from her mother. Never has it occurred to her to actually play her role and perhaps offer a solution or advice. That's not her style.

But she's never been that kind of mother. Ever since they were young, Ruth has always treated her two daughters like these autonomous little beings. Olivia and Anna were expected to make up their own minds about what they wanted to do, to eat, to wear. They told *her* when they were hungry or needed a nap, not the other way around. Olivia was the only girl in her grade who didn't have a bedtime in primary school.

It is less a parenting philosophy and more the result of her mother's perennial mental absence. Ruth has always been tucked too far into her own mind to produce the kind of overbearing parenting Olivia has seen inflicted on some of her friends by their parents. Like Mai, for example, who is treating this upcoming trip overseas as some kind of a freedom ride away from a parental dictatorship. Ruth has always acted more like a curiously inquiring neighbour than a parent with a vested interest.

Sometimes she wishes her mother were more of a mother. Especially now. Because Olivia has no idea what to do. Because in those hellish two weeks of the exam period, Olivia's carefully laid life plans have gone out the window, and she has no clue how to get them back. And the worst part of it is, one of the few people who actually knows about it is her mother. What world does she live in where she's too afraid to tell her friends of her failure, but feels completely safe telling her own mother?

She's spent the weekend avoiding her friends. But that can't last forever. There's goodbye drinks this weekend and then there's the trip. She chews on her lip. How the hell is she going to avoid telling Mai? Mai, who somehow straddles the miraculous line of ditz and genius, who probably got the highest marks in the school in Legal Studies and English? Olivia has no idea how to break it to her that they probably won't be studying at uni together next year. She couldn't tell Will if she wanted to either. Because he won't even speak to her.

The only friend she could stomach telling is Kit, because Kit doesn't care about stuff like that. And Kit's as much as a disaster area as Olivia right now, anyway. She stabs at the clump of brown rice dominating her plate and frowns. Is there anything else that can go wrong? She always thought this period between finishing school and starting uni would be amazing. She'd be high off a successful VCE campaign, and then she'd get to take this holiday, collect up the study score she needs to get into this course, and then enjoy the summer until it's time to start. But no.

Now, instead of going on this holiday, all she wants to do is burrow down in the lounge room at her mother's, watch movies, and ignore all phone calls and social media. Possibly for the rest of her life.

Ruth picks up her purse. "I have to get going. You've got your keys?"

Olivia nods. "What are you doing now?"

"Interview." Ruth grimaces. She hates doing media. "You?"

Olivia shrugs.

Ruth pats her arm. "Don't agonise over it Livs. Law's not the only option. This trip might open your world a little. You never know." She stands and pulls on her jacket. "I'll see you in a couple of hours."

Olivia doesn't reply. Because as far as she is concerned, law has always been the option. She and her friends have been planning on it for years. It's the only thing she has ever been able to think of that she might want to do. And when you have two ridiculously successful parents and a sister who can only be described as a quiet overachiever, you've got to have your own life plan.

They pay and leave the café. Olivia watches her mother turn for the tram stop and slinks down a laneway back to the house as another wave of misery overwhelms her. Time to hide.

* * *

Liza, Melbourne

She locks the shop door behind her and tries to forget work immediately. The pre-Christmas period has to be the worst time in the world to be a retail slave. Liza likes to think of herself as an accommodating, pleasant person, which is why she's kept this job since she was sixteen. But some of the customers today were seriously getting on her nerves.

She's trying to decide whether to catch the tram home or not when the traffic lights decide it for her. The green light flashes on the pedestrian crossing leading to the leafy street that will take her through the gardens and back to her house. Enticed by the cool breeze that coasts up the tree-lined avenue, she takes off across the road.

She paces through gardens, taking the wide path that cuts between the cricket field and dog park, breathing in the smell of the grassy air. She can't believe she's about to trade in this dream weather for far colder places. She frowns. The thought of this holiday makes her stomach clench now. And not in the good way. How is she going to do this without Kit? The excitement she felt when she left the house to meet Kit yesterday has been swiftly replaced with dread. Does she even want to go on this trip anymore? Not that she has a choice. She's paid up and ready to go.

How does Kit manage to be so magnificently hopeless all the time? She's the sweetest, most awesome person Liza knows, but she's also the most delightfully shambolic too sometimes, limping from minor crisis to minor crisis. Most of them are usually fallout from yet another poorly executed life plan. And most times, Liza could have warned her.

When Kit told her halfway through Year 12 that she'd decided to move in with Liam, Liza thought it was a terrible idea. A terrible idea because, as per Kit's sometimes questionable taste, this guy is a dickhead. And how is moving out on your own during the final months of high school ever a good idea?

She accelerates, trying to quench all doubts with the mind-numbing physicality of a sprint. And she doesn't let up until she's home again.

The television echoes down the narrow passage the moment she opens the door.

Her father is in the living room, watching the cricket.

"Hey Dad. Aren't you supposed to be building a new compost bin?"

He dodges that with a question of his own. Instead he asks, "How was work?"

"Fine."

"And how's Kit?"

"The same. No, wait. Worse."

He chortles into his tea. "What's our walking disaster done now?"

"I'll tell you about it later." Liza doesn't want to get into it right now. What if her parents freak out about her travelling without Kit? They've got enough to freak out about right now.

"And you? You okay, kiddo?"

"I'm fine," she tells him, wishing they'd both stop asking her that. It's getting annoying.

But she shouldn't complain. She *did* just mess with their world in some pretty important ways. In just one conversation, she told them the two things she needs them to know before she leaves for this trip. Things they maybe never expected to hear.

First, she broke it to them that she doesn't know if she wants to race any more, even though Patrick sat both her parents down a few months back and informed them that with her current times, Liza has every chance of making the Comm Games selection squad. And then she told them that she's pretty sure she's gay.

Considering these grenades she's launched—things that she's sure made their picture of her fracture into little pieces and reform again—she should probably let them keep asking if she's okay. Maybe she should ask them if *they're* okay.

Instead of going to the shower to slough off the sweaty run, she flops down in the chair under the window and stares at the brand new backpack sitting on the floor. Besides, she might as well let them worry, because in a couple of weeks she'll be on the other side of the world and they won't be able to ask her every five minutes. She'll just have to figure it out for herself.

There's so much she wants from this trip. Maybe too much. She wants to know if she knows how to live without training in her life. She wants to know if she'll miss it. She also wants to figure out who'll she'll be if she's not that girl who runs, which is pretty much how everyone

knew her at school. And it's true. She's never done much more than train and study and sleep. And now she feels shy and awkward around new people, like she never learned the rules. And this is even more daunting because next week she's going to be travelling with three strangers. She kicks her legs up onto the bed and stares out the window.

And maybe she'd like to meet someone. Someone *not* like Alika. A girl who actually likes her. Who can look her in the eye. But that part can probably wait. For now, she'd just like to begin to figure out who this new version of her is going to be. She just never thought she'd have to start doing that without her best friend at her side.

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POINTS OF DEPARTURE

BY EMILY O'BEIRNE

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