

millie bird

Millie's dog, Rambo, was her Very First Dead Thing. She found him by the side of the road on a morning when the sky seemed to be falling, fog circling his broken shape like a ghost. His jaw and eyes were wide open, as if mid-bark. His left hind leg pointed in a direction it normally didn't. The fog lifted around them, the clouds gathered in the sky, and she wondered if he was turning into rain.

It was only when she dragged Rambo up to the house in her schoolbag that her mother thought to tell her how the world worked.

He's gone to a better place, her mother shouted at her while vacuuming the lounge room.

A better place?

What? Yes, Heaven, love, haven't you heard of it? Don't they teach you anything in that bloody school? Lift your legs! It's Doggy Heaven, where there's eternal dog biscuits and they can poop wherever they please. Okay, legs down. I said, legs down! And they poop, I don't know, dog biscuits, so all they

do is poop and eat dog biscuits, and run around and eat the other dogs' poop. Which are actually dog biscuits.

Millie took a moment. *Why would they waste time here, then?*

What? Well, they, um, have to earn it. They have to stay here until they get voted over to a better place. Like Doggy 'Survivor'.

So, is Rambo on another planet?

Well, yes. Sort of. I mean – you really haven't heard of Heaven? How God sits up in the clouds and Satan's all underground and everything?

Can I get to Rambo's new planet?

Her mother switched off the vacuum cleaner and looked squarely at Millie. *Only if you have a spaceship. Do you have a spaceship?*

Millie looked at her feet. No.

Well, you can't get to Rambo's new planet then.

Days later, Millie discovered that Rambo was most definitely not on a new planet and was, in fact, in their backyard, buried half-heartedly under the *Sunday Times*. Millie carefully lifted the newspaper and saw Rambo, but not-Rambo; a Rambo shrunk and eaten and wasting away. She snuck out every night from then on, to be with him while his body went from something into nothing.

The old man crossing the road had been her Second Dead Thing. After the car hit him, she watched him fly through the air and thought she saw him smile. His hat landed on top of the give way sign and his walking stick danced around the lamppost. And then it had been his body, cracking against the kerb. She pushed her way through all the legs and exclamation

marks to kneel beside his face. She looked deeply into his eyes. He looked back at her like he was only a drawing. She ran her fingers over his wrinkles and wondered what he'd used each one for.

She was then lifted away from him and told to cover her eyes, because she was *just a child*. And as she wandered home the long way, she thought it might be time to ask her dad about People Heaven.

You see, Squirt, there's Heaven, and then there's Hell. Hell is where they send all the bad people, like criminals and con artists and parking inspectors. And Heaven is where they send all the good people, like you and me and that nice blonde from 'Masterchef'.

What happens when you get there?

In Heaven, you hang out with God and Jimi Hendrix, and you get to eat doughnuts whenever you want. In Hell, you have to, uh . . . do the Macarena. Forever. To that 'Grease Megamix'.

Where do you go if you're good and bad?

What? I don't know. Ikea?

Will you help me make a spaceship?

Hang on, Squirt. Can we finish this next ad break?

She soon noticed that everything was dying around her. Bugs and oranges and Christmas trees and houses and letterboxes and train rides and textas and candles and old people and young people and people in between. She wasn't to know that after she had recorded twenty-seven assorted creatures in her Book Of Dead Things – Spider, The Bird, Grandma, next door's cat Gertrude, among others – her dad would be a Dead Thing, too. That she'd write it next to the number

twenty-eight in letters so big they took up two pages: MY DAD. That, for a while, it was hard to know what to do other than stare at the letters until she couldn't remember what they meant. That she would do this, by torchlight, sitting in the hallway outside her parents' bedroom, listening to her mum pretending she was asleep.

the first day of waiting

When playing Dot-to-Dot, Millie was always Dot One, her mum Dot Two and her dad Dot Three. The line came from deep inside Dot One's belly, wrapped itself around Dot Two and Dot Three – usually watching the tellie – and back again, to make a triangle. Millie would run around the house, her red hair bouncing about her head, the triangle between them spiralling around the furniture. When her mum said, *Would you stop that, Millicent?*, the triangle roared into an enormous dinosaur. When her dad said, *Come sit beside me, Squirt*, the triangle curled into a big, beating heart. *Ba-boom. Ba-boom*, she whispered, skipping awkwardly to its rhythm. She nestled in between Dots Two and Three on the couch. Dot Three grabbed Dot One's hand and winked. The flashing pictures from the tellie lit up his face in the dark. *Ba-boom. Ba-boom. Ba-boom.*

On The First Day Of Waiting, Millie stands exactly where her mum points to. Right near the Ginormous Women's Undies and across from the mannequin wearing the Hawaiian shirt. *I'll be right back*, her mum says, and Millie believes her. Dot

these are the things karl knows about

touch typing

When Karl was a tiny boy thinking enormous thoughts, he would sometimes pretend he was sick so he could accompany his mother to work. She worked in a big room full of typing women, and Karl would sit underneath her, the top of his head touching the bottom of her chair, the perfect line of her legs in front of him, pushed together with such tenacity you would need a crowbar to pry them open. But there was still a sweetness about them, somewhere in the roundness of her calves. He only remembers his mother in bits and pieces now. In legs, and fingers, and reflections in mirrors.

The women had seemed otherworldly to him, like something that might be kept in a glass case or on a wall. He closed his eyes underneath his mother's chair and listened. The typing was loud and unforgiving. All these pretty women, their bodies perfectly still, their fingers warring against typewriters.

Things began to advance for Karl when he learned the term *touch typing*. He realised that the women didn't have to look at their fingers to make them move in such dramatic ways. This made him feel something he didn't understand. He didn't know it was all about his own skin until he met Evie.

Years later, after his first day at typing school, Karl sat at the kitchen table and plunged the tips of his fingers into a bowl of ice. They were red and throbbing. But it was nice to see pain on his fingertips, and feel it running up his forearms, like something trying to get inside him. It felt nice to have something trying to get inside him.

For the first time in his life he felt in a position of power, in the decisive way he was forced to use his fingers. The keys flew at the page – *thwap, thwap, thwap* – like he was throwing punches. He loved the potential of those white pages. That they would start off as nothing and become something. It made him feel as if he, too, could become something.

By day he filled pages with meaningless sentences about cats and dogs, and Jack and Jill and Jane. He typed them as though they were the most important things anyone ever had to say. By night he dreamed in typing exercises. In the morning, he sang the exercises into the showerhead, closing his eyes and letting the water run down his face. His mind lit up in letters as he spoke.

He loved watching his fingers skidding across the keys. He could see that perhaps he was beautiful, because he was creating something. It wasn't music they played in concert halls or art they hung on walls, but to Karl it was both of those things, and more.

evie

Karl had met Evie at typing school. Eventually he would come to like the way she clutched at her chest when she talked, as if she was trying to stop her heart from falling out. When they first met, however, he simply thought her name would be good to say during sex. There was something excitingly sacrilegious in the way he could tie Original Sin and sex together. He had, of course, known her as Eve back then; Evie would come later, when he knew her knees and elbows and bellybutton better than he knew his own. Her name had, from the very

beginning, felt incomplete without the 'ie', kind of hanging there with a drama that seemed unnecessary.

After two months, there had been three conversations, the eyes, the touches, that walk she did with those hips he couldn't blink out of his mind. If she was in the room, he couldn't think of anything else but her presence. Her heat and energy were so noticeable to him. It wasn't just his mind, running through the various things that would happen once she gave him permission to know her, it was also his body; he felt it needing to be near her, as though his skin was going to burst into flames if they didn't touch.

One night, she pirouetted out the door after class, her eyes resting on him. Karl sat in front of his typewriter thinking, *Eve's fingers-Eve's hands-Eve's smile-Eve's hair*. When the last straggler had filed out, he removed, with great difficulty, the letters M, A, R, Y and E from his typewriter. He calmly walked to Eve's desk and removed the R and M from hers. He glued the letters to the tips of his fingers, MARRY on his right hand, ME on his left, and appeared on her doorstep in the fading light. He held his hands up on either side of his face, wiggling his fingers a little. She put her hands on his forearm and typed, *Yes, thank you*.

Their wedding day was simple. Nothing too grand, nothing too quiet. Nothing went wrong, really, unless you count the organist fainting at his post, mid-'Here Comes the Bride'. But even that was okay, because when his head fell onto the keys, and that terrible sound of unmatched notes crunched together, echoing throughout the church like a moment of suspense in a film, it made Karl feel as though his life was worthy of suspense, and worthy of film.

Karl stood at the front of the church, feeling the sweat gather in the lines on his palms, feeling the eyes of the typing women seated across two pews, looking like birds on a wire. Their legs were all crossed identically, and everything about them seemed so conscious of the angle of their tilted heads, and he thought, *Have these women always been like this?* There was something about them that made him uneasy.

And then Evie stood opposite him, looking at him so warmly from her plain, unremarkable face. He loved that plain, unremarkable face. The smattering of freckles, the uninteresting nose, the thin lips, the ordinary eyes. When quizzed about Evie's appearance, Karl had trouble describing it. He knew the derogatory implications of the word *plain*, so instead he lied and said she was pretty.

Women were funny, he knew. Not hilarious, but strange and unpredictable. They saw every possible implication of a word, like a prism refracting the light, making too many patterns on the wall. He had learned from an early age to say little and pretend he was slow. When you don't say much, Karl discovered, women assume you're deep and mysterious; they don't, for whatever reason, assume you're stupid.

Her dress was a dull white, and there were no patterns on it, like the reams of paper he threaded through the typewriters, day in, day out. The wedding ring he gave her was customised, a plain silver band with an ampersand typewriter key attached to it in place of a stone. Later that night, as he removed her dress in the glow of moonlight and lay it on the bed as though it was her, he typed on the fabric, *I am so glad I met you, Evie*. But he didn't type like he was warring with the fabric,

or throwing punches. He typed delicately, as if he was typing into liquid and trying not to make any splashes.

And when he typed, *I am here, Evie*, across her collarbone, so softly he was barely touching her, she put her lips on his ear and whispered, *Me too*.

love

In their life together, Karl and Evie didn't go anywhere, ever. They were each other's foreign countries.

Only unhappy people leave home, Evie declared.

And we don't need to leave, he said, typing on her forearm.

Yes, she said, resting her forehead on his chin. *We don't need to leave*.

They lived such a small life. Trees and flowers and ocean and neighbours. They never scaled mountains, or braved rapids, or went on tellie. They never ate strange animals in Asian countries. They never starved themselves or set themselves on fire for the greater good. They never delivered a rousing speech, sang in a musical or fought in a boxing ring. Their names wouldn't be in textbooks for children, their faces wouldn't be on banknotes. They would not get their own statue. And, when they died, their names would disappear like their last breath, a curiosity for cemetery-goers and nothing more.

But they had loved. They grew plants, drank tea in the afternoon light, waved at neighbours. They watched 'Sale of the Century' every night and, together, were reasonably accomplished at it. They exchanged Christmas gifts with their butcher, their fruiterer and their baker. Karl gave an old typewriter to the young, highly literate boy working at the newsagent. Evie made mittens for the girls working the

morning shift at the supermarket. Karl was a guest in the local grade six class, talking about the history of their town. Evie was a guest in the local year seven class, demonstrating how to make a pavlova. Karl fiddled about in his shed. Evie fiddled about in the kitchen. They went for looping walks in the morning and evening, through local bushland, through the town, along the shoreline. Their life was a twenty-kilometre radius around their house.

death

He remembers not being able to talk to her as she lay there at the mercy of machinery and starchy sheets. His words in the air, without hers, were horrifying. She was sleeping, she was always sleeping. She would open her eyes occasionally, but they reeled like a newborn's.

So he had stood up and pulled back the sheet that had been so tightly enclosed around her, as though someone wanted to trap her there, pin her to this bed like a specimen of the Almost Dead. He rested his hands on her arm, just bone really, nothing much more, and he typed, softer than breath, *I am here Evie*, and then walked around to the other side of the bed, and rested his palms on her other arm, and her skin was not her skin, there were bruises up this arm, so purple, with such definite edges, like maps of little-known countries, and he thought, *You are my foreign country*, but he typed, *I am here Evie*, and then he lifted up her hospital gown to just above her knees, and her thighs were just nothing, they were just nothing, and he rested his open palms on one, and felt so much nothingness, and he was crying now, he couldn't help it, he was so weak, he was so weak, there was just so

much nothingness, and he thought about making nothing into something, and he typed with force and flair this time, watching his fingers, the way they moved on her skin, he so desperately wanted her to feel the beauty of what his fingers were doing, and he typed, *I am here Evie I am here Evie I am here Evie*, over and over again, all the way down her thigh, over her knee, down her shin, like a line of ants marching down her leg, and he leaned over the bed and typed down her other leg, *I am here Evie*, and then moved to the bottom of the bed, and held her feet, her very, very cold feet, in his fists, as small children hold crayons, and he was holding them so hard, as hard as he'd ever held anything, but she didn't move, she didn't notice, she didn't even stir.

I am here Evie

I am here Evie

I am here Evie

sadness

In the days following Evie's death, Karl whispered the words, *My wife's dead* in the mirror, preparing for some sort of audience. He pictured the woman from the post office, the next door neighbour, his brother. He loved the feel of their imagined discomfort. The power it gave him. It somehow made all that had happened worthwhile, as though he had gained some sort of secret power through the death of his wife.

He slept in their wardrobe, looking up at her clothes like he was gazing at the stars. They hung over him like apparitions, the lack of her so obvious in the thinness of these clothes. It felt as though he was lying under a guillotine; long, thin strands of cloth that would surely kill him, somehow.