

Jan Ellison

The Company of Men

For a few years I had in my possession two rain slickers that smelled of whiskey and cigarettes and aftershave. They were cherry-red and lined with fleece, and I kept them in a cardboard box on a shelf above the toilet in the tiny apartment where I lived alone. Then when I was about to be married and I wanted to be rid of so many failings, so many unhelpful habits and longings, when I believed the past could no longer inform me, I threw the slickers into the Goodwill pile and lost them forever. Now what is left is a single photo I return to now and then, of two young men in bright red coats hitchhiking under a darkened sky.

I met them first on my last full day in New Zealand, after I'd rented a bike and ridden three miles up a dirt path to touch my fingers to a glacier. It began to rain, and by mid-morning when I got back down to the village, I was soaked through to my bra. My bus for Christchurch wasn't leaving until one, and across from the bus depot was a pub. Inside there was a fire in the fireplace and two young men—Jimmy and Ray—standing at the bar in their rain slickers drinking martinis. Ray was stocky and dark, with a sunken torso, small eyes, and a huge, humped nose. His hair was thin and black above a high, smooth forehead, and all his features seemed bunched up in the middle of his face. Jimmy was taller and fair, with square shoulders and fine blue eyes. His hair curled at his ears and at the nape of his sunburned neck. There was something loopy, almost accidental about the way Jimmy stood in his frame, as if he were blind to the effect his size and good looks might have—the effect they were having—on a wet girl standing in the doorway of a bar seven thousand miles from home.

I'd been traveling alone for a year, since I finished college, through Europe and India and Southeast Asia, and I'd just spent a month at the northernmost tip of the North Island picking tomatoes in the sun for minimum wage, eating cheese sandwiches, and sleeping alone in a pitch-black room of empty bunks. It came to me suddenly as I stood in the doorway of the bar that I was sick of the struggle in it—sick of crouching in the sun, sick of taking it all in, of making notes on yellow legal pads, of stumping across rock and snow in my boots and across sand and kelp and coral and wet grass in my worn-down Tevas. It was not exactly loneliness I wanted to banish as I crossed the bar toward them but a kind of self-imposed austerity, a compulsion to justify the experience, to tear meaning from it, to bring something home. It was

the days of weighty, maturing experiences strung together one after another in what seemed to me then a long stretch without a flirtation, a debate, a convergence—a black-out drunk.

Jimmy and Ray had just graduated from the University of North Carolina and they were on a tour of New Zealand and Australia and maybe Bali or Kathmandu. Under their rain slickers, they dressed the way they must have dressed back home, in jeans and leather loafers and button-down shirts, and they drawled when they talked. They addressed me as *y'all*, which made me feel oddly important, as if I carried with me the authority of a secret entourage. We drank five fast rounds together while the rain beat the window and the mud slid off the hill outside into a great brown puddle. In the distance were the white tips of the glacier rising up out of a black mass of cloud. While we drank, Jimmy rested his hand against the small of my back and Ray told me about his girl back home—a redhead who'd stolen his money and broken his heart.

When it was time for me to go—when the exhaust was shooting from the back of the bus and the faces of passengers began to appear in the windows behind the drenching rain—the wish to stay had hardened into longing. But I had a half-price ticket to Sydney in the morning and my tourist visa was about to expire.

“Y’all need to stay and drink with us,” Jimmy said, as I stood and dropped a twenty on the bar. He picked it up and stuck it in the back pocket of my jeans. He downed his martini, put the toothpick between his teeth, and leaned in toward me, so close I could feel his boozy breath in my eyelashes. I slipped off the olive and held it between my teeth, then passed it back to him in an almost-kiss.

“You’re still wet,” he said. He slipped off his rain slicker.

“Don’t give her that, you loser,” Ray said.

“Easy boy,” Jimmy said. Then he shrugged and slipped the coat back over his own shoulders. I stuck my tongue out at Ray and walked from the bar into the rain and got on the bus.

Everywhere in Sydney I saw people I knew. I’d step out of an underground station into the sun, and there would be a girl from my freshman dorm, sitting at a bus stop, or the married man I’d been with in London the year before, ducking into a cab. My arm would shoot into the air to flag them down, then when they turned toward me, the people I knew vanished into the puzzled faces of strangers. The idea of going home was always with me, but there were good reasons not to. My father had moved out again, before I’d left, and I suspected this time it was for good. “At some point things have to be admitted,” was what he’d said, not to my mother but to me. I knew I was making it easy for him, staying away, giving up the cause, but the time and distance had muted my sense of responsibility. It had lulled me into believing my mother might be only heartsick and sad, not despairing, not desperate.

I moved into a flat with three German girls who’d been backpacking around the world together for a year. They hardly spoke English and that made it easy; there was no pretending we would take up as friends. I signed up at a temp agency—one that didn’t check work visas and paid in cash every Friday. The agency found me a six-month assignment, typing for an insurance company in the city. The work was

dull but the money was good and I buckled into it. In my spare time I renewed my longstanding self-improvement campaign. I quit smoking and stayed out of the bars; I worked on my typing speed; I wrote down words I didn't know on yellow legal pads and looked them up in the dictionary in the library on my way home. From the library I'd walk through the park, past the pub at Woolloomooloo and up over the hill to King's Cross. I'd buy myself a falafel and sit at the fountain in the square, watching the hookers in the doorways, the backpackers and tourists and solitary businessmen moving in and out of the strip joints and clubs, the restaurants and shops and seedy bars.

I was taken up in the change of seasons, the shift from the misty rains of May into the flat gray cold of what was summer back home. Then the holidays approached and the days began to lengthen and grow hot and expectant. On the last day of my typing job, I took the long way home through the park and stopped at the railing overlooking Sydney Harbor. The Opera House glowed white and magnificent in the distance, the water glistened, and a full blue moon floated low in the sky. I was filled up with a vast emptiness, a glorious freedom, and as always I was careful to stay there and treasure it, to take it all in. But what can you do with a feeling like that? It was like other solitary moments during those years of traveling—it was the Himalayas at dusk after a cold day walking alone, it was the deck of a freighter on the Adriatic Sea at sunrise, it was Paris under a velvet snowfall. It was manufactured and overly private and tiresome. The other murkier moments meant more, finally, the dramas that began for the most part in bars, when the swirling motion of the evening would straighten itself and alight on a human form and there was suddenly the possibility not just of desire, and of being desired, but of a story of poverty or addiction or betrayal. There was the promise of some new knowledge—the shape of an ear, the smell of musk—or a shift in one's view of oneself in the world.

I started walking again, fast now through the park, and when I got to the bar at Woolloomooloo I went right in, sat down on an empty stool, and ordered myself a pint. Bob Dylan was on the jukebox. I sang along to "Like a Rolling Stone" and ran my hands over the smooth wood of the bar. I thought I heard my name, but I was done with phantoms and I kept my head steady. I cupped my beer between my hands. Then there was the heat of a body behind me, and sudden hands on my shoulders, and I turned and it was Jimmy.

"Hey, Catherine," he said. He took the seat on one side of me and Ray took the seat on the other. I turned toward Ray. He looked at me deadpan and stuck out his tongue. I stuck out mine and we both laughed, as if this was the way we'd greeted each other every Friday night for a decade. It encouraged me, Ray's laughter, but it unnerved me, too. He was so ugly, so private, until his face was thrown open with that laugh. Then he was all teeth and bright eyes, his forehead wrinkling like linen. What I learned, though, was that he could close down again in an instant and make me wonder what I'd done.

Jimmy opened a tab on Ray's dad's card and ordered us all martinis, and we started drinking hard and fast. Ray began to talk.

"So this girl, Jasmine, back in Raleigh. The reason we're here?" He said it like a

question. “Her house was next to mine growing up. Jimmy’s was three doors down. She was just punky, a tomboy. Then she lets her hair grow out and she has these green eyes that look like contacts. Junior year in high school, she gets a ’67 Mustang convertible for her birthday and we paint it up for her. Yellow like she asked for. ‘Yellow like lady’slipper,’ was what she said.”

“She was into flowers and shit,” Jimmy said.

“Yeah, but only yellow,” Ray said. “She planted up her whole front yard with them—roses and tulips and whatever. They even wrote it up in the paper, with her picture and all in a yellow dress. Then she went off to Brown and her mom sold the house and we didn’t see her for a while. Until bingo. She turns up last summer on the Cape, and she’s still got the car. Jimmy was down in Miami working on a boat so it was just me and Jasmine, staying up all night doing coke, driving around in the Mustang. And in the back seat she’s got all these pots she made on a potting wheel in school, like dozens of them, all planted up with yellow flowers.”

Ray stared straight ahead as he talked, at the orderly rows of bottles lined up on the bar. He paused and took a swig of his martini.

“So what happened?” I said.

“Well so she transfers to Carolina, right, for senior year? And we spend the whole year pretty much together, and we’re talking about moving to New York after graduation. I was dealing, so I knew I could get us an apartment and everything. Then right after finals, she takes five thousand bucks out of the stash in my room and splits. She just drives her car out to California and hooks up with some professor dude—he’s ancient, like forty, and he’s gotten a job out there—and the way I find out about the whole deal is she sends me a postcard.”

“My God, there must have been signs,” I said to Ray. “To just take off and leave like that.”

“Maybe. But I never had times like that with anybody,” Ray said.

“Except me,” Jimmy said.

“Even you, Jimmy my boy.”

I’d been listening to Ray with my elbows up on the bar and my chin in my hand, with the intensity that can come over you when you’ve had a lot to drink. His story seemed strange and sad and unforgettable. While Ray talked, Jimmy kept the drinks coming and he let the back of his hand fall against my arm on the bar. He let his thigh rub against my knee beneath it. This seemed to be the arrangement. With the drinks and the roving hands and the sweet eyes and the good looks, Jimmy’s role was to draw people to the two of them, and Ray’s—with his stories and his mournful eyes—was to keep them there. He would keep us there until finally we could not bear to hear the story again, then Jimmy would rescue us, with a drink or a song or a wild run in the dark through the park.

“Fucking A!” Jimmy said now from the jukebox. He slapped his hands against the glass and dropped in some coins. Neil Young’s “Sugar Mountain” came on and he came and sat close beside me and Ray stopped talking while Jimmy and I sang. The song was suddenly something that was ours alone—we both knew every single line—and Ray would not join in. When we pressed him he said, “I don’t sing,” as if singing were a habit he’d long since outgrown.

Jimmy and I sang it over and over, and after a while Ray and his story seemed to recede until there was only Jimmy and me and those lyrics and the smoky blue glory of the bar. My final memory of that first night is of standing at the jukebox at last call, trying hard to fit a quarter into the slot so we could sing that song one last time.

The next morning, I woke up fully dressed under the covers with my shoes placed neatly next to the bed. There was no obvious evidence of intimacy—no chafing or fluids or foreign smells. There wasn't a phone number either, nothing inked on my palm or scribbled on a napkin and tucked into my sock. I spent the day sleeping off my hangover and waking from time to time to wonder how I might track them down—Jimmy and Ray—I didn't know their last names. When I finally got up and showered, it was late afternoon, and the German girls were watching TV. I started a letter to my mother. I wrote things I knew she'd like; I'd saved some money, I was getting along with my roommates, I was enjoying the neighborhood—all the shops, the square, the outdoor cafés. She didn't need to know that it was the seedy heart of the red light district, that the streets were lined with drug dealers and prostitutes and strip joints and bars. I started a letter to my father and crumpled it up and threw it away. It was the first of many letters to him that I started and never finished, or finished and never sent. I was afraid to lose the closeness we'd had, but contact with him seemed duplicitous—an encouragement or even a betrayal.

At six o'clock, Jimmy lumbered in through the open door of the apartment with a tall potted plant held against his chest. The trunk was flung over his shoulder and the branches swept along the carpet behind him. He dropped the plant to the ground, spilling potting soil onto the worn white shag. His eyes were closed to half slits and there was a look of deep concentration on his face. He seemed especially large in the narrow white room and his cheeks were full of color beside the pale German girls, who carefully moved their eyes from the television set to him.

"What are you doing there, sir?" I said.

"Liverin' you a *gift*," he said, and he walked out the door. I went to the window and watched him. He staggered across the street into the lobby of the old Rex Hotel and emerged again with a plant under each arm. Then he was back in the apartment to deliver them, and still the Germans said nothing. When he left again, they began to murmur amongst themselves, and when he returned with two more plants, they smiled at him and then at me and they actually laughed.

He made a dozen trips, each time pinching a plant or two without anyone seeming to notice and dropping them heavily in the center of our living room floor. Finally he sat down hard on a bare patch of carpet, crossed his legs Indian style, and gave me a triumphant grin made up of perfect white teeth. Then he closed his eyes and his body tipped backward and his head landed on the ground with a thump.

He was too heavy to move. All we could do was straighten his legs and lay his arms over his chest. Later, when the German girls had gone to sleep, I brought out a pillow and blanket and lay down next to him. His shirt was pulled up out of his jeans and I put my palm on his stomach and touched the fuzzy blond hairs around his belly button. His stomach was not exactly fat, but it was not so firm as to suggest

vanity or self-discipline, two qualities that at that time I found unpleasant in a man. I ran the back of my hand over his sunburned cheek. He smelled of booze and smoke and the kind of aftershave frat boys wore in college. It was a smell that reminded me of fast, haphazard sex.

I curled into him, into the sheer size of his body. There was heat in the places where our bodies touched and the moment seemed simple and absolutely complete. It stayed that way between us. I never knew what he thought about most things, whether he had grave opinions about the economy or the nature of men or the existence of God. The things he knew about—football, sailboats, the business of manufacturing heavy equipment—couldn't power a conversation between us. We were rarely alone and we were almost always drunk, so there was never a requirement to get to know each other in an essential way; there was no imagined future. We were free of the heaviness I had so much of in college and later, when you announce to yourself and the world that you've met someone special and then you must stay the course. You must whisper into the night and you must embrace his terrible flaws—the dandruff at his temples, his tendency to speak rudely to waitresses, his inclination to overdress.

With Jimmy it was simply about putting “Sugar Mountain” on the jukebox and letting our thighs touch under the bar. It was about talking to Ray and drinking and letting time pass without clutching it or measuring it. It wasn't about ideas; it was about the weight and heat of a body against your own. I felt something like it again when I held my firstborn in my arms. The simple physical fact of her moved me—her button chin and the fleshy lobe of ear, her head smooth and blond as sand, her milky breath against my face.

After that first night, the Germans moved the plants onto the balcony of the apartment, and with muted hand gestures and apologetic smiles, made it clear they'd prefer it if Jimmy didn't make a habit of passing out on our living room floor. So we took to passing out at the flat just off the square that Jimmy shared with Ray and a half-dozen other backpackers—mostly Kiwis on summer holidays—who came and went. I was happy in that scrappy flat—the stained green sofa, the tiny kitchenette stocked with beer and tomatoes and sometimes an avocado or a lime, the walk-in closet where Jimmy and Ray slept on bare mattresses that, laid end-to-end, reached the entire length of the room. There was a collection of empty whiskey bottles in one corner, two fishing poles in the other, and their open backpacks in the center, overflowing with clothes. Taped to the wall over Jimmy's bed were photos of their trip so far; Jimmy and Ray in wet underwear beside a lake in the sun, Jimmy and Ray climbing a mountain trail in their loafers, Jimmy and Ray in their rain slickers, hitchhiking under a darkened sky.

We got drunk every night, mostly in the Cross, sometimes down at Woolloomooloo or The Rocks. We'd sleep until noon and then head out for lunch and start drinking all over again. I had enough money saved that I could have picked up a round or two from time to time, but they never once let me. The drinks were charged to one of their fathers' cards, and the bills were taken care of back home.

Jimmy was a drinker without angst or moderation. He always said yes to the next

one, and I was the same. It was not exactly that we set out to get drunk. It was that there was always the idea of that first drink in our minds, and when that one was gone, there was the idea of the next. Later it would work that way for me with babies, so that despite the burdens in it—the chaos and worry, the sleeplessness, the unqualified loss of freedom—when one child was weaned I was ready for the next, for the sweetness of a small hot body against my chest.

Ray was different. He got drunk when he set out to, did not when he did not intend to, and was often sober enough to remember the night and report back in the morning.

“Jesus, you puked on my fucking shoes,” he’d say to Jimmy, or “You hit the bartender in the eye with a paper airplane.”

“Did I?” Jimmy would ask me, grinning.

“Not that I remember,” I’d say, which was most always true.

When I was drunkest, Jimmy would get me onto the mattress, cover me in a blue sheet, and tuck it tight around me. He knew something about being kind to women. He opened doors for me, he held my hair out of my face when I threw up, he made me drink a glass of milk before bed. And when Jimmy was first to get bad at the bars, Ray and I would each take an arm over our shoulders and drag him home. He’d stand on the mattress with his shoulder propped against the wall and yell, “I wanna get drunk.”

“Lay down,” Ray would order. “You’re already drunk.”

“Am I?” Jimmy would say. Then he’d sink down and close his bloodshot eyes and sleep for fourteen hours straight. It was a routine they knew by heart, and I sensed that Ray took a deep pleasure in keeping Jimmy safe in the world.

I never asked Jimmy what he studied in college, or what he planned to do when the trip was over, or whether he’d ever been in love. It was Ray I wanted to understand. Ray lived right on the edge of ugly but to talk to him was to want to heal him or win him. At the bars, sometimes he ignored me, or coldly put up with me as if I were a wart he might someday burn away. Other times he sat up close and talked to me about Jasmine, telling me the same stories over and over again. For years I carried around a picture in my head of Jasmine driving fast along a coast road in her yellow convertible, her red hair flying out behind her, her back seat filled with flowers. It was a picture that could bring on a tightness in my chest, a vague longing to be an original, a girl who could win love absolutely and then walk away. When Ray spoke of her it was with reverence and regret; he had not forgiven her but he had not given her up either. Something about that made me want to make him see other women in the world; it made me want to make him see me.

On Christmas Day we planned a picnic on the beach. We took the ferry over to Manly early in the morning when the beach was empty and the air was still damp. Ray went off to the boardwalk and came back with three-dozen clams in a bucket and a gallon jug of red wine. He opened the clams with his pocketknife and we ate them one after another, washing them down with wine straight from the bottle. By noon the beach was packed and it was so hot you couldn’t walk on the sand. Ray

went off again and came back with bread and cheese, peaches, pistachios, and a case of Victoria Bitter. Later, the German girls came by, pale and strong in their one-piece suits, and the Kiwis arrived with another case of beer. We assembled for a game of football—gridiron, the Kiwis called it—American style.

I can still feel myself in that day, my stomach flat and brown in an orange bikini, my hair wet down my back, the way I could sense my own ribs under my skin. The sun was hot on my head as I bent for the snap, ready to sprint after the ball. I didn't catch a single pass, and Ray traded me for one of the German girls who caught one and scored. But I didn't care. With every drink I became more beautiful in my own mind and the day grew more perfect. Later I would throw up over the railing of the ferry in the wind. I would pass out on the couch in the flat with a cigarette in my hand and burn a hole in the upholstery, and I would find, in the morning, dark spots of sunburn high on my cheeks that took years of creams and gels to take away. But in the place in my memory where that day lives on, nothing was damaged. Nothing was lost.

By dusk everyone else had gone and I sat between Jimmy and Ray under the changing sky and watched the water go from green to indigo to an oily black. In the half-dark, we staggered into the huge surf. I dove, stayed low to the sand and let the waves beat in my ears and sweep over me. I went through every wave, and I never ran out of breath. I might have been afraid out there in the waves, but I wasn't. That whole time was like that; I might have been worried about my health or my reputation or my safety but I never was. I was protected and drunk and happy, and if there is room for regret it is not for the time we wasted but that it ended too soon.

In February, when the Kiwis were leaving Sydney to go back home, Jimmy and Ray threw them a going-away party in the flat. I imagined later that it was the night I lost them, the night that the trip around Australia in the green van—up through Queensland and the Gold Coast to the hot wastelands of Darwin and the white beaches of Perth—became a journey that would take place without me.

What I remember about that night is Jimmy with a threadbare undershirt over his square shoulders and how we ripped it, not in a rage or a passion but because there'd been a tiny hole above the right nipple, and I began to tear and everyone joined in and then someone poured a beer over our heads. At some point in the night the German girls came by—three steady girls with thick calves, short skirts, and high heels. I remember that when they arrived I had a paper bag over my head; someone had cut holes in it so I could see and breathe.

When almost everyone had gone and I was edging toward a blackout, I found myself in the walk-in closet on the wrong side of the room on the wrong mattress—with Ray. We were sitting cross-legged, facing each other, our knees touching, and Ray was holding a fishing pole across his lap. Then he was reaching his fingers out toward me and as I raised mine to meet them, he looked right at me, he leaned in toward me, and we were caught up in a kiss. It was gentle at first, almost a question, then it grew more urgent, until his lips against mine were hard and necessary.

Jimmy was suddenly standing over us. *Hey!* he said, laughing at first like it was a

joke he might have been in on. Then *hey!* again, then *hey!* a third time, loudly, with his hand pressing the ball of my shoulder away from Ray. So we stopped. Ray whispered something to me as we pulled away from each other, some words that I understood and cherished and then forgot—and that I can never get back.

I woke the next day on the mattress next to Jimmy. The afternoon sun filtered in through the doorway and fell on his face. The circles under his eyes were purple as dusk, and he seemed impossibly dear, the more so because I was afraid I'd lost him. At the same time, there was a small, stubborn part of me that wanted Ray to acknowledge the thing that had happened between us, that wanted him to make it happen again. It was a part of me I had not yet begun to understand—the part in the habit of expecting attention from men under the most extraordinary circumstances. Not just the first glow of desire, of glossy hair and full lips, but the whole messy miracle of love. It was not that I wanted the entrapments that come along with love, or that I would promise to offer it in return. It was that I believed that once a man knew me, he would see how different I was from an everyday girl—how forthright and clever and secretly kind—and he would find me indispensable.

It was a habit that persisted through heartbreak and havoc, through years of evidence to the contrary. Then I was married, and there were glimmers of it sometimes—at the pool where my son takes his swimming lessons, at the grocery store when a bag-boy pushed my extra cart to the car—but for the most part I became convinced I'd outgrown it. Then on a hot night in August we threw a dinner party for friends. The kids were at my in-laws for a long-awaited overnight, and afterward, when the wives had kissed me and thanked me and gone home to relieve babysitters, and the other husbands—three men I've known for a decade—had assembled for a game of poker, I sat down in the chair left empty by my husband who had promptly passed out on the couch. One arm was flung across his face and the other hung over the back of the sofa, so that from where I sat I could see his long fingers dangling there, I could see his clean, clipped nails.

The game progressed. There was bluffing and folding. There was whiskey and chain smoking and there were outrageous bets scribbled onto cocktail napkins. There were forearms—handsome, hairy, manly extremities brushing against mine on the tabletop as we handled the cards. Then all at once there was a knee pressed purposefully against my thigh beneath the table. There were brown eyes intent on my face and breath hot against my ear. And beyond that, where my husband's arm had been, was only the back of the couch. There was no sign of the formidable wrist, the sturdy thumb, the callused, well-loved palm. There was no further sign of my husband in the room at all. I was on my own in the company of men with the makings of a straight in my hand, aces high. Desire was thumping in my chest and the instinct to win, to go forward with abandon, was shooting through me, across the back of my neck and down between my legs.

At the same time—reaching me through the fog of scotch and cards and sex—was the power of my own house. There was the china waiting to be put back in the hutch. There was the cabinet door threatening to come off its hinge and a stack of catalogues

to sort and toss. There was the phone, the bulletin board, the family calendar—the command center of our domestic life. Down the hall were my children’s rooms, their mattresses and pillows encased in special covers to keep the dust mites at bay. Those rooms where each night I checked breathing and the temperatures of foreheads, where I kissed the gentle dip between cheeks and ears.

The question that persists, that pursues me even now, is whether it was only the card I was dealt—the seven of spades—that saved me. That freed me to shift my legs into open space, to lay my cards down on the table in a fold, and with an unlikely pinch of resolve, take my leave.

Jimmy got a two-week job down at Rushcutter’s Bay scraping the underside of a yacht. When he was working that first week, I imagined him there, drinking a Coke in the sun. On Friday, I bought two sandwiches and a six-pack and made my way down to the boat yard. The day was warm and bright and the bay was dotted with sails. Jimmy was there and so was Ray. They were fishing. They weren’t sitting close to each other and they weren’t talking, but there was something between them, something silent and male, both a history and a future, and I almost turned around and left.

“Hey,” Jimmy said, when he saw me. He glanced at Ray.

“I brought beers,” I said.

“We never drink when we fish,” Ray said. There was a silence. Then he laughed and took two beers. He popped one open for Jimmy and one for himself. “They’re biting today. That’s damned sure,” he said.

I opened myself a beer and sat down on the dock next to Jimmy. The wood was gray and splintered, the water green with moss. We sat in silence for a while and then Ray’s line began to move. I stood up as they did, as Ray reeled in his line, a fish slick and panicked at the end of it. Jimmy picked the pliers out of the bait box and worked the hook out, while Ray held the fish and then dropped it in the bucket with three others. There was nothing for me to do but stand and watch.

They finished their beers and began to pack up their fishing gear.

“That Kiwi band’s playing at Woolloomooloo a week from Saturday,” I said to Ray.

Ray looked at Jimmy then, and something passed between them, something that had already been decided.

“We’re gonna be heading north, actually,” Jimmy said. “We got a van and all.” His face was soft with apology as he said it, and I might imagine now that he touched my cheek or took my hand in his. But he did not. He knocked his elbow against mine and punched me gently in the arm. We were like that together sober—clumsy and halting and overtaken by silences it was Ray’s job to fill. But Ray had already turned and was walking up the hill home.

The day they left, the sky came down low and dark. They had their rain slickers on. I was coatless and cold. Ray loaded the arsenal of booze they’d assembled for the trip into the back of the van while Jimmy and I stood on the sidewalk and watched.

“I could sleep in the front seat,” I said finally.

“No fucking way,” Ray said from the back of the van.

“Ah, c’mon Cath,” Jimmy said. He cocked his head to the side and turned his lips down in a pout. Then he took off his slicker and laid it over my shoulders. It had started to rain.

Ray came and stood next to Jimmy. For one long minute, he looked right at me and the lines of his face softened. My nose began to tingle with emotion and I had to look away. He walked toward me, slipped his rain slicker off his shoulders and laid it over me, so that I was wearing both coats, one on top of the other. I didn’t know then what he meant by it, and I don’t know now, but I hope he meant that I was forgiven—for my secret greed, for wanting to be so universally loved.

When they’d heaved their backpacks into the van and closed the doors and waved and were gone, I stood alone for a moment on the sidewalk in the rain, excessively dry under two rain slickers—cherry-red and lined with fleece. Then I walked up to the flat and let myself in and surveyed the closet that had been their room. They’d left the photos behind and I peeled one off the wall, slipped it into my pocket, and headed out into the rain. I started walking in the opposite direction of home, in and out of weather, into parts of the city I’d never been before, with my hands first in the pockets of one coat, then in the pockets of the other. As I walked, I thought about them hard—Jimmy and Ray—going over each episode in my mind, weighing and measuring, considering cause and effect. Not in an effort to shed the loss but to savor it, to shape it, to give it permanence.