

Island Girl, Unwritten

By Sarah Rose-Cherry

For the fourth time, Darcy glances out the window towards the street. The neighbour's cat is still licking itself on the footpath but there's no sign of the familiar blue van. Her dad called her from the road about two hours ago, when he was driving through Sydney. The time on her phone reads 3:53 pm. Maybe Dad took a wrong exit. Does he even use a GPS? Surely he's moved on from the street directory.

The coffee table is adorned with a white linen tablecloth, three wine glasses and a bottle of Kangaroo Valley Shiraz. Frangipanis from the communal garden float in a bowl of water; that was Darcy's touch. The rest was Lex. A bit fancy, but they'd still have to sit on cushions on the floor.

'You okay, babe?' Lex wraps their arms around Darcy's waist from behind. Darcy leans into Lex's body, pulling them closer.

'Yeah. Just a bit nervous.'

'It'll be fine. Your dad'll love me.' Lex pauses. 'I hope.'

Darcy spins around to face Lex, her back to the window. 'What's not to love?'

Lex beams, their dark eyes blazing. Darcy could spend weeks, years even, staring into those eyes, tracing the shape of Lex's square jawline, their full lips . . .

'I never thought I'd be so lucky,' Lex purrs into Darcy's ear. 'To have such a sweet-talking, hot babe of a girlfriend.'

Darcy shivers. With Lex's warm breath on her neck, she can't think straight. Oh the irony. 'You're proving very distracting right now.'

'That's the aim.'

Just as Lex leans in to kiss her, there's the sound of an engine sputtering into silence.

'He's here,' Darcy breathes. She rushes to the front door and pulls it open.

The cat has disappeared, and the old van is parked on the curb. Blue paint peels off the sides, but the van's roof racks look new, sporting Dad's surfboard.

'Darcy girl!' Dad wraps Darcy in a close embrace. The intimacy shocks her into stillness. His arms around her feel thinner than they once did. Her arms around him are limp, unsure.

'Hey, Dad.' Darcy smiles nervously up at his tanned, weathered face. 'You made it to Wollongong.'

'Yeah, it was a bit rough sleeping in the van, but I made it. I managed to catch some decent surf on the way.'

'Hi, Caleb.' Lex strides forward. 'So great to meet you. Are you a hugger?'

'Ah, sure.' Dad pats Lex awkwardly on the back.

'Well, um,' Darcy hesitates. 'I'll show you around.'

In the glow of the bedside lamp, Darcy snuggles underneath her doona. She pulls the cover to her chin, inhaling its freshly washed scent of eucalyptus.

'Daddy?' she calls out. She turns her head towards the half-open door, where light spills in from the kitchen.

'Coming, Darcy girl!'

Darcy hears the bubble-bubble-click of the boiling kettle. There's the splash of hot liquid, and her dad's soft footsteps down the hall. Faintly she hears the rumble of the ocean a few streets away, at Pippi Beach.

She can hear the ocean most nights from their weatherboard house on Beachside Way, where she's lived since she was a year old. This is the only house she's ever known, though it's not the first she's lived in. Years ago, they lived on acreage in Palmers Island: baby Darcy, her dad, and her mother, Melanie. Her beautiful mother, with the dark curls and honey-warm smile.

The door creaks open and Dad stands in the doorway, mug of tea in hand.

'Righto, which story are we having tonight?' Dad surveys Darcy's bookshelf, crammed with picture books and some special big kid classics.

'Island Girl!'

'You're not sick of that one yet?' Dad rests his tea on the shelf and pulls out a well-loved picture book. On the cover is a drawing of a child playing in the sand.

Dad settles himself on the rug beside Darcy's bed. He leans in towards his daughter and she inhales his comforting, musky scent, like sweat mixed with salt. Dad balances the book on Darcy's lap.

'There was once a young girl who lived with her mum and dad on a beautiful island.'

'Wait!' Darcy flicks to the previous page. She points to the inscription in the front. 'Read this bit.'

'Ah, sorry.' Dad clears his throat. 'To darling Darcy, always my island girl. Love Mum.'

'So, Caleb, what d'you think of the apartment?' Lex touches Darcy's arm reassuringly. Her dad hovers in the doorway between the laundry and kitchen.

'It's great. Really . . . homey.'

‘I know it’s small, but it’s so affordable, considering how close it is to North Wollongong beach.’ Darcy twirls a strand of curly hair around her finger.

‘It’s not that small,’ Dad encourages, almost stubbing his toe on a low bookshelf.

Lex grins sideways at Darcy as if to say, See? It’s going well! ‘It’s almost happy hour. How ‘bout a drink?’

They perch themselves on the cushions beside the coffee table. Lex uncorks the Shiraz with a gentle pop and pours the wine.

Unthinking, Darcy drinks deeply from her glass. ‘Oh, we forgot to cheers.’

‘Thanks for driving so far to see us, Caleb.’

‘Yeah, thanks, Dad.’

They clink their glasses with soft murmurs of ‘cheers’.

Darcy starts school in Yamba. Her best friend is Nina, a wiry, wild-haired girl from a farming family in Palmers Island. During playtime Darcy and Nina are inseparable, pretending to be ponies and making pebble fairy gardens.

One weekend, Darcy invites Nina over to play. Nina’s mother, Sandy, drives Nina to Darcy’s manicured suburban street; so different to the bush-quiet of Palmers Island.

‘Hi, honey.’ Sandy hugs Darcy with genuine affection. ‘Thanks for inviting Nina over. Where’s your dad?’

‘Inside baking something. Nina, let’s play in my room!’ Darcy tugs Nina into the house and the delicious scent of warm, freshly baked banana bread wafts into their nostrils. Sandy follows them into the kitchen.

‘Hey there, Nina.’ Dad places a still-hot tray on the worn bench top. ‘I made this ‘specially for you. Stay for a cuppa, Sandy?’

The girls scoff down some thick slices of banana bread, butter coating their mouths. Leaving the adults to chat, Darcy leads Nina along the wooden hallway. Darcy's bedroom is large but the space feels a little claustrophobic. Almost every item of furniture is littered with books.

'Wow.' Nina stands in the middle of the floor, wide-eyed. 'You've got way more books than me.'

'You can borrow some, if you want.' Darcy shoves some books aside so they can sit on the bed. 'Dad said I had to tidy these up but I forgot.'

'Mum always says I gotta clean my room and I hate it. My annoying brothers mess it up every time and –'

But Darcy is only half-listening. She can hear her dad's low voice from the kitchen, and he's talking about her.

'Yeah, I think it's hard on Darce, only having me for company. I just worry that when she's older, there'll be things she won't talk to me about. When she's going through changes, I mean. If Mel was still around . . .' He stops, and Darcy's heart thumps at the sound of her mother's name, so rarely mentioned.

Sandy murmurs something too softly for Darcy to catch. It sounds a bit like, 'Darcy's lucky to have you.' Or maybe it was, 'Darcy's always going to love you.'

'Y'know, in Germany, they insist on looking each other in the eye during a toast,' Lex says, casually sipping their wine. Lex, Darcy and her dad are still lounging on cushions at the coffee table.

'Oh?' Dad frowns slightly. 'Why's that?'

'They say if you don't, you'll be punished with seven years' bad sex.' Inwardly, Darcy cringes.

Dad is silent for a moment, and then chuckles. ‘Well, no-one wants that!’

Darcy glances at Lex, surprised. Lex has this way of making people feel at ease; a talent she herself sadly lacks.

‘So, Lex.’ Dad sips his second wine with apparent relish. ‘Darce tells me you grew up around here.’

‘Yep. I lived in Sydney and London for a long time, though.’

‘Right.’ He pauses. ‘And how did you two meet?’

‘Well . . .’ Lex raises one eyebrow at Darcy.

‘We met in the queer collective at Wollongong Uni, Dad,’ Darcy says quickly.

‘Lex was finishing off their Masters in Social Work when I started my PhD.’

‘The queer collective,’ Dad repeats. ‘Hmm. Back in my day, queer was an offensive word.’

Darcy shifts uncomfortably on her cushion. ‘The meaning of the word has changed. It’s been reclaimed by our community.’

‘Right.’

Dad falls silent, and Darcy watches him, anxiety rising in her chest.

‘Dad, you know I identify as queer.’

Rather hastily, Dad gulps more wine. ‘Well, yeah. Ever since I walked in on you and Nina in high school.’

‘Why bring that up now?’ Darcy grips the underside of the table. Across from her, Lex shakes their head in warning.

‘It’s just that, ah . . . it’s taken me a long time to understand. I thought it might’ve been . . . experimentation back then.’

‘I’m twenty-five years old. How much more time do you need?’ Darcy glares down at the white linen tablecloth, blinking back tears.

‘Babe.’ Lex shifts across the floor towards Darcy. ‘Why don’t we talk about something else?’

Darcy doesn’t reply. She leans her head against Lex’s shoulder, and closes her eyes. She breathes in the fake-leather smell of Lex’s favourite jacket.

‘Darcy girl.’ Dad clears his throat. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.’

Darcy opens her eyes. ‘I’m not a little girl anymore, Dad. You would know that, if you’d bothered to visit me in Wollongong. Like, ever.’

Dad runs his thumb around the top of his wine glass, now empty. ‘I’m here now, aren’t I?’ he says quietly. ‘I’m here now.’

Darcy and Nina lay sprawled on the rug in Darcy’s bedroom, surrounded by senior Geography textbooks and crumpled paper.

‘If I’ve gotta write another word about soil salinity, I’m gonna scream,’ Nina complains. They’ve both left their Living Environment essays to the last minute.

‘Anyway, why do we have to handwrite these? They should just let us submit typed essays.’

‘Yeah, I bet city kids all have their own laptops,’ Darcy says dreamily, chewing on the end of her pen.

‘Lucky biatches. D’you reckon we’ll ever leave this backwater, Darce? Move to Brissy, maybe?’

‘Hell yeah.’ Darcy sits up and crosses her legs, tapping her pen on her thigh. ‘You and me, Nins. We can move to the big city for uni.’

Nina’s green eyes light up. ‘Yeah! And live in a cute retro apartment. I’ll study animal care, and you can study . . . um?’

‘Probs English or writing. A literature course, maybe.’

Nina squeals with delight. She tosses her essay aside and curls up beside Darcy.

‘We can be together forever.’

‘Totally.’ Darcy squeezes Nina’s arm. In an impulsive move, she tucks a strand of Nina’s frizzy hair behind her ear. ‘I love you heaps, Nins.’

‘You’re alright, I guess,’ Nina giggles. She doesn’t move away.

Darcy is so close that she can see the faint freckles sprinkled across her friend’s cheeks, like hidden constellations. She reaches out to touch them, and Nina’s eyes widen.

‘What’re you doing?’

‘Nothing! I just –’ Darcy falters. ‘I wanted to touch you. Should I stop?’

‘Um, yeah. I mean, no!’ Nina stares at her friend like she’s a stranger. Then, in an odd, husky voice, Nina whispers, ‘Please don’t stop.’

Later, they eat vegetarian lasagne on stools at the kitchen bench. It’s barely 9 o’clock when Darcy arranges the sofa bed for her dad. With muttered goodnights, they lay awake in separate rooms. Only Lex sleeps peacefully, stealing the doona as always.

The next morning, Lex has an early meeting. Lex kisses Darcy goodbye, and their lips taste like coffee and beeswax chap stick. Like home.

Darcy forces herself out of bed. On Fridays, she usually teaches a Children’s Literature tutorial, but classes have finished for the semester.

In the lounge room Dad’s awake, examining his daughter’s bursting bookshelves.

‘*Little Women.*’ His tone is wistful. ‘You loved this when you were about ten.

D’you still have *Island Girl* somewhere?’

‘Of course.’ Darcy feels a pang of grief: the beloved picture book. Such a small but precious fragment of her mother, of another life. To this day, she’s never seen the Palmers Island house where they once lived, as a family. Complete.

Darcy and her dad decide to walk the few blocks to the beach. They order drinks from Diggies Café, flick their thongs onto the grass and head down to the shore.

‘Still not a coffee drinker?’ Darcy drains her cappuccino, digging her bare feet into the sand. It feels cool and ticklish between her toes.

‘Nope, always a tea man.’

A jogger huffs past, headphones blaring. Dad drags one heel through the sand.

‘Darcy, I’m sorry for last night. I’m sorry for everything.’ He sighs. ‘For not being around. For taking so long to meet Lex. She’s great.’

‘It’s they,’ Darcy corrects. ‘Lex is non-binary, remember?’

‘Ah, righto. Sorry.’

They wander towards the tidal pools, watching waves collide with the rock shelf. As each wave breaks, spray fizzes through the air.

‘So.’ Caleb slowly sips his tea. ‘D’you keep in touch with Nina?’

‘A bit. She lives north of Brisbane now with her husband. They’ve got a property.’

‘Sounds about right. Darce, y’know that day, when I walked in on you two? I should’ve talked to you about it. You must’ve been so confused back then.’

Darcy’s face reddens. ‘It’s okay. It was a long time ago. Nina was my first love, but we were so young. We grew apart.’

‘Well, I was thinking, next time you come home, why don’t you bring Lex? You can show her – I mean them – around Yamba. We can visit the old house. The Palmers Island house.’

‘Really?’ Darcy’s heartbeat quickens. ‘That’d mean so much to me.’

She stands at the very edge of the rocks, and a deep sense of peace washes over her.
Below, the ocean swirls with diamonds, water reflecting light.

‘Mel would’ve wanted you to see it.’ Dad’s face glows in the sun. ‘What’s an island girl without her island?’