

Bluebottles dot the sand around me, and I, as I navigate around them like a soldier would a minefield, try to imagine what it would be like to be one. Small, insignificant, but carrying an electric bite no tourist would see coming. That's my favourite part of the beach – watching the tourists trying to tame the wild surf and rips, failing to realise the real danger dwelled beneath the sand kicked up by all those screaming toddlers building their sandcastles destined to be swallowed up by the tide.

Bluebottles aren't just one animal, but rather a colony of organisms, each little life fuelling another, all working cogs in a machine driving life and all its wonders. I want that. Standing on this beach, looking out to the horizon, it's too easy to feel alone. The universe is so big. Too big. The bluebottle, I think, is another little galaxy. A miniature Earth. A cosmos brimming with life and love, every cell having its purpose and its story, every organism useful and loved, quite unlike my cosmos– a place where people would rather die than live one more day on the grind, all the bills and the taxes and the hate and the judgement and the wars and the deceit. A place where it can sometimes become too much.

Had I been born a bluebottle, maybe I wouldn't have to be so afraid of growing older, afraid of understanding why people decide to, want to, end it all. And, the idea of stinging tourists gives me an odd sense of glee. Too many times I've had Americans push in front of me at the self checkout with drawling "sahrry"s like they were more important than me: a twelve year old boy wanting to buy a roll of Hubba Bubba. Had I been born a bluebottle, my fellow organisms and I would've fought back, sending electricity pulsing through tourists' veins, our hidden power revealed. Now, in this body, I'm just too small. I've always been too small.

Weaving my way through the lines of tourists and locals sprawled across the beach, through the piles of seaweed and rubbish, I see something that makes me stop. Centimetres away from my feet, a metre away from the relaxed figure of Mum as she sunbakes, is a shining speck of blue peeking up from the sand, in wait like a coiled snake.

Mum looks up at me from her beach towel, lying on her bronzed belly and squinting through her sunglasses. 'Whatcha lookin' at?'

'The bluebottle.'

She smiles. She's always smiling. 'You might be the only person in the universe who likes them, you know?'

I do know. She tells me all the time. 'I mean, someone has to. Everything must be loved by someone, right?'

'Of course,' she says, but I feel as if she is saying it just because she has to. Because she's my mum and it's her job to nurture my dreams and ideals.

Like the rest of the world, she doesn't see the appeal of bluebottles. They're just another obstacle in the sand, another thing she has to protect me from. I don't mind that she doesn't like them. I prefer it. This way, I have them all to myself.

She continues: 'Like I love you.'

This is my daily reminder. While other mums might remind their son to brush his teeth and close the toilet lid once he's done, my mum reminds me that her love for me is perpetual. I'm lucky. Some kids in my class don't get told by their mums that she loves them enough, and I think that's why they're so mean and angry all the time. They don't know they're loved. That's the real killer. That's why people decide to end it. If I could do something to help them, I would, but no one, not even the kids in my class, will believe me if I told them they are loved. I have tried before. Josh Maxon stole my clothes from the locker room after swimming practice, so I had to walk around in just my towel trying to find them. When I did, when I found him, he wouldn't give them back. He just laughed. Laughed to hide. Laughed to seem tough. Laughed like I was scared of him. But I wasn't. I told him that, and I told him that he doesn't have to act so tough all the time. That he was loved anyway. He didn't think so. Didn't give me my clothes back. Said something about my mum. Always something about my mum. Not funny. Never funny. Punched him in the nose. Broke his nose. Got my clothes back. Nearly got suspended. Nearly.

Josh Maxon is a repeat offender, but he hasn't touched me since, barely even looking me in the eyes when we pass each other in the hallway. Maybe I knocked some sense into him, or maybe he's just too scared now.

I shouldn't have punched him. Shouldn't have hurt him. Should've left him alone, because now he hates me more than ever. Scared of me more than ever, but he

shouldn't have said anything about Mum because I love her and I would do anything to protect her. I would punch Josh Maxon ten times over to protect her. That's my job. I'm her paladin. Me. Eli Matthew Arcara.

Kids like Josh Maxon need love like I need the ocean. In a way, love is the ocean – deep, never-ending, wise and powerful, violent, passionate, ancient and dangerous. Some people are raised surrounded by love, now able to navigate rough waters without an inkling of fear. Others are like the tourists, new to it, beaten by raging waves without knowing how to tame them. Then there are those who have never seen it, never known it, never acknowledged it. Never felt the water against their skin. Never smelt the salt in the air. Land-locked by hate. Marooned by loneliness.

The organisms that make up a bluebottle probably love each other more than the universe itself, which is why they can live in harmony the way we humans wish we could, always falling short because of one, simple thing – human nature.

'Eli,' Mum says, pulling my attention once again from the bluebottle at my feet. 'Come here.' I do. I sit on her towel, sink into her chest as her arms wrap around me and pull me down to lie beside her, the heat of her skin melting into my own. She holds me tight until, after a couple minutes of warmth and love, her grip slacks. Sound asleep. Other kids my age like Josh Maxon may cringe at this, thinking they're too old to hug their mums. I don't. This is her daily reminder.

I crane my neck to look over Mum's arm slung across my torso to see Dad gliding through the water, inching away from the yellow and red flags. Unlike the splashing tourists, the ocean is Dad's home – his pulse. He grew up on the New South Wales coast, living every breathing moment in the sea or thinking about the sea. We had to move to Sydney for Mum's job, but whenever we have a free weekend he is finding a

way to visit his hometown – a seaside town called Wooli along the coast. He loves the ocean more than he loves us. The ocean is his god and it pulls him in like a magnet, leaving us behind on the shore, waiting for him to come back. Sometimes I think he won't, diving into the waves and never resurfacing, swallowed by the endless deep blue, forgetting Mum, forgetting me. We're too small for him. Always too small.

It's a part of him, engrained into his DNA, eyes like the deepest crevices of the ocean, movements swift as the water, free and untamed. I think it's a part of me too. Whenever I'm away from it, it's like a piece of the universe is missing.

Swimming in the school's swim team is the next best thing. Sure, it means early wake-ups and the square head of Josh Maxon, crooked nose and all, most mornings, but the feeling of the water against my skin, the way I can cut through the pool, moving like a dolphin through the ocean, home once again, is all worth it.

I'm not the best on the team. Josh Maxon is better, and he knows it. His freestyle is a frenzy, sloppy and aggressive, like he's trying to beat the water like he beats kids smarter than him, but it doesn't matter. No matter how perfect my form may be, how smooth and easy, he will always be better. He just gets there faster. That's all that matters. Speed. Strength. The amount of blue ribbons pinned to your shirt. I always beat him at butterfly, though. I'm the best butterflyer in the squad, and my coach tells me I might be the best in the state. The next Michael Phelps. That's a bit of a stretch, though. I'm just Eli Matthew Arcara. I'm just a boy. An average boy who can swim better than ten other boys. Boys who can't swim butterfly for shit.

The swimming carnival is next week. I need to win. The pool makes me feel powerful, like the ocean. When I swim, I feel like I can finally beat it. Eli Matthew Arcara, victorious.

Dad was the best in the state when he swam competitively. Maybe the best in the country. Whether it be breaststroke, backstroke, freestyle or butterfly, he always getting his green, red and blue ribbons, bronze, silver and gold medallions. He shattered record after record. An Olympic hopeful. But, he never did like being confined to a fifty by twenty-five metre pool. To him it was a cage; a boundary to something that should be boundless. He always belonged to the ocean. When he dropped out of his swimming squad, swearing to never step into another pool again, he let his entire town down. He didn't care. Never did care. Nothing could come between him and the ocean, the waves, the swell. I admire him for that. But, there's a difference between admiration and love.

For a while, I think he hated me for picking up swimming. But, after sometime, I realised that wasn't the reason.

Now, we're in Bondi – the biggest, the most crowded, the most hectic beach in the entirety of Australia. Bodies packed in rows. Families clustered together. Children screaming and girls lying so still on their towels you can't tell if they're alive or dead. Everything here is so big I feel like if I take my eyes off it, it'll swallow me up. Swallow me up and drown me alive. I burrow deeper into Mum's arms. The ocean here isn't quite right. Dad knows that. That's why it's never enough for him. Nothing is ever enough.

Lying against Mum's chest, I look back out to where he cuts through the water. He's looking at the shore, but he isn't looking at me. He's looking at volunteer lifesavers, all dressed in red and yellow, lounging back in beach chairs near the flags. One volunteer in particular – seventeen year old Jake Arcara. My brother. The brother who seemed to be even more distant, even larger than the ocean, slipping from my grip

like water whenever I got too close to him. Less like a brother, more like some god that could never be touched by someone like me.

Jake doesn't like Dad, but Dad adores Jake. To Dad, Jake is someone who is finally as big as him – with that dazzling smile and the way he speaks and the way he slices through the waves as if they were nothing. To Jake, Dad is trying to smother him, living vicariously through him and making sure he does everything the way Dad wants it. It drives him insane. I know this because he tells me, but he doesn't tell me as his brother. He tells me as if I were a sponge and his problems were water. He gives them to me to clean up and keep inside my skin, soak them in deep, make sure they don't dirty his conscience. I don't think Jake knows this. I've never told him. Nothing I say can amount to the thoughts, so powerful and so deep, humming inside his head.

Mum stirs. 'Honey, can you get the sunscreen from the bag?'

I look around. I can't see a bag.

'Where is it?'

She gently lifts herself up, unwrapping her arms from my waist and stealing every single bit of warmth I had. 'It was right there.' She points to the top of her towel. 'Was it there when you walked over?'

I shake my head.

Mum frowns, lines creasing along her forehead. 'Go tell your father. I'll get Jake to help.'

The air chills. The urge to run homeward crawls up my throat.

*I am not scared of him. I am not scared. I am not scared.*

And yet, something inside me is.

I stand up. Mum does too. And then she runs towards Jake, expecting me to run to Dad, but my legs don't let me. Instead, I'm running down the beach, through the rows of towels and bathers, because there in the distance I see a flash of blue. The familiar blue of our, her, beach bag, clasped in the hands of a slouching stranger.

And I run after him.

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Our apartment is small. One bathroom. A kitchen and living room. Two bedrooms. Jake and I have to share. When we first moved, when I was eight and he was thirteen, it was great. We would laugh, snack, watch TV and play games much too late, trying to stay quite so Dad wouldn't hear. Back then, we were brothers. We were friends.

Now, I think he is embarrassed.

I don't blame him. If anyone at school finds out that he is sharing a bedroom with his twelve-year-old brother, he will crawl under his covers and never come out. Reputation matters a lot to him. It means everything. If he has to ignore me, disown me, hurt me to preserve it, then I can't stop him. Sometimes, I wonder if his reputation is the only thing that is truly his.

Dad gets antsy within the apartment's walls. It's too small for him (always too small), which means that he is always vanishing. Sinking under the surface and returning only when his lips are blue. I like to think of our apartment like an unopened Coke bottle. Pressure presses against the thin walls, threatening to explode in a violent spray if you move too quickly. Whenever Dad leaves, we can move free again, the tension released into the atmosphere.

It has yet to explode, but I still find myself waiting. Waiting for it all to fall apart. Waiting for the ceiling to collapse and bury me underneath.

The only way to ease the tension in Dad's presence is to impress him. Do something amazing, heroic, become the prized, praised son that he always wanted but never quite got. Last year, Jake chased a handbag thief down Campbell Parade, eventually hunting the man down and ripping the bag from his greedy, calloused, slick hands. When Dad found out, he was the happiest he had ever been. It was unnerving. Strange. He never really smiles anymore – I think he's forgotten how. He just pulls back his lips, baring his teeth like dog, the light in his eyes dull and cold. Painted rather than felt.

The week after was the best week of my life. I could breathe easy knowing that our little fantasy would collapse. And while Mum and I had sunken in the background, Jake's good deed blaring in the foreground, I didn't mind. I prefer the background. Think about it: on the beach, the ocean is the foreground, screaming at you to pay attention to its glimmering waves and deadly grip. As you walk towards it, entranced, allured, you don't notice what's underfoot. Glass. Bottle caps. Bluebottles. And that's what makes those little things so powerful.

Invisibility.

However, I know if I stay in the background too long, I'll be forgotten. Sometimes I feel like Dad is forgetting me. Letting me slip from his fingers. So, now is the time to make my move.

It's time to become the hero.

I chase the thief along the searing sand. He sees me. Runs faster. Grips the bag tighter. Holds it close to his chest like it's been his all along.

‘Give it back!’ I yell after him. He turns to the sound of my voice, but he still runs, so I do too. I can’t even remember what’s in the bag. I don’t know what’s in it, or why it’s so important, but I know that I need to get it back. Mum will be proud of me. She will look at me like I’m her paladin, holding me tight and running her fingers through my hair like she used to do when I couldn’t sleep, and she will kiss my forehead, her warmth blossoming inside my mind and my dreams. Jake will be proud of me. He will see that his little brother is cool, that he doesn’t have to be ashamed about having to sleep in the same bed as me, and that I am worthy to be his younger brother. Dad will see me. I will grow. I will be bigger than the ocean, even if for just one day.

The man runs up the graffitied ramp and onto the grass. I follow.

I look closer at the man as I chase him. He is frail. Coat-hanger shoulders. He is dirty, hair matted and clothes too big. He doesn’t look well. For a moment, as he slows down, rasping and feet shuffling, I wonder if he needs the bag more than I do.

The park is empty. He finally stops.

He’s younger than I thought he was, but his sunken eyes and red cheeks make him look ill. He looks like he is dying. Maybe he is.

‘Take it.’ He holds out the bag, loose in his fingers. He sways slightly, mouth smacking open and shut but not saying anything.

Open. ‘What? Why?’ I exclaim. He held it so close to his chest. He doesn’t want to let it go. He looks like he needs it. Needs it more than I do.

Shut. ‘You... You chase me across Bondi, yelling at me to give it back to you, and then you ask me *why* I’m giving it back? What are kids like you doing these days, anyway?’

Open. I don’t understand. ‘Do you need it?’

Shut. The man raises an eyebrow, struggling to catch his breath. ‘I need a lot of things.’

Open. ‘Money?’

Shut. ‘Always.’

Open. ‘For food?’

Shut. ‘Not exactly.’

A breeze passes through the trees and licks my face. The bag rustles, and I’m not sure if it’s because of the wind or because of his shaking hands. Carefully, slowly, I take the bag from him. I drop it on the ground, unzipping it and digging through the piles of crap that Mum was so insistent on bringing. A stick snaps. I look up to see the man walking away, back hunched and hands in pockets, swaying like sugar cane.

‘Wait! Don’t leave yet!’ I say.

Surprised, the man stops. And he waits.

I find Mum’s wallet. Two twenties, a fifty, a ten and three fives. As the man watches, I pull them from the leather fold and hold them out to him.

‘Take it,’ I say.

The man hesitates.

‘You need it. I don’t. Please, take it and get better.’

‘Get better?’

‘You’re sick, right?’

The man chuckles. Open. ‘In a way, yes I am.’ And then he frowns. ‘But I’m not taking money from a kid.’

‘I’m not a kid. I’m twelve.’

Another chuckle. 'Whatever you say.' Carefully, slowly, he crouches down to my level. He looks at me with his ghostly eyes, still rasping for air. Shut. For a moment I think he's going to take it, but then he says: 'Here's a tip, kid: don't give money to the guy who tried to rob you.'

And then he stands up and turns on his heel. Walks away. Laughs to himself. Coughs. Turns his head around and says: 'But thanks, anyway.'

He moves like a ghost. Feet light. Like he is hours, minutes, seconds from leaving the world forever.

And then he collapses.

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The man is convulsing. Shaking and twisting and gurgling and I don't know what to do. I think he is dying. Is he dying? I don't want him to die. Not here. Not now.

But I don't know what to do.

I reach out for him, holding his shoulders, trying to steady him but he just struggles against my grip. His skin is hotter than the sand. I don't know what's happening. I don't know how to help him. The heat is too much so I try and pull him into the shade. The relief is instant against my neck and shoulders, but my heart still pulses uncontrollably, thrashing like the man is.

And then he stops. Head rolls to the side. Whites of his eyes peeping out from beneath his eyelids. Body stiller than a lake on a windless day. Breaths shaky, rasping, barely there.

Footsteps approach from behind.

‘Hey, kid! Is he alright?’ A stranger crouches beside me. She’s wearing a graphic tee. It says *Coffee Vibes*. Checking over the man, she looks like she knows what she’s doing. I hope she does. I pray she does.

‘I... I don’t know. He just fell down and started shaking and he just stopped then and I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what –’

The lady stops listening. She’s on the phone now, calling 000 like you’re supposed to and telling them what I told her but calmer, more direct. As she talks she rubs my back, trying to calm me down but not really knowing how. The man refuses to move. I want him to move. I need him to.

She hangs up.

‘The ambulance is coming. They’ll be here soon. He’ll be alright.’

But something in my head is telling that he won’t.

So I grab Mum’s bag and I run.

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I run back down the beach, trying desperately to forget so I fill my head with simple, non-man-convulsing-on-the-ground related thoughts. It’s thirty five degrees today, meaning that flocks of locals and tourists alike flood the sand, making the journey interesting and testing, dodging running toddlers and flying cricket balls. The beach day is coming to a close, people shaking off their towels and trying to round up their children. Dad likes to stay until the beach is nearly empty. Then, he can have the ocean to himself.

I wonder what Dad would have done. Would he have stayed with the man? Or just left him shaking on the ground, thrashing and spluttering? I don't know. I don't know anything.

Getting closer and closer to the slice of beach Mum reserved, I begin to notice the commotion. People running left to right. Lifesavers in red and yellow searching through the crowds. Lifeguards donned in blue with their hands on their hips, shaking their heads and scanning the beach. Confused onlookers watching them as they go, refusing to stand up and help. Mum in tears near the flags. Dad standing behind her. Jake scouring the crowds.

Do they know? Do they know about the man I abandoned? The man who didn't accept the money even though he needed it, wanted it, and then collapsed and thrashed and stilled like a fly sprayed with Mortein?

Jake is pushing through the gathering mob. Calling out my name. Meeting my eyes. Stopping two metres away.

He looks at me and blinks. I notice his eyes glistening. The only time I've seen them shine like that was when Erin Solomon broke up with him just before Christmas last year, or when we watched *Marley and Me* for the first time when I was six.

'Eli.' Blink. 'Where have you been?'

I hold out Mum's bag. My trophy.

'I found it,' I say, trying to keep my voice steady. It's all I can say – he'll hate me if he found out what I did. I can't tell if that's relief or anger or pride in his eyes. I gave up reading him a long time ago. 'I found Mum's bag.'

He looks at me. Really looks at me. Tries to dig through my head and uncover everything that a big brother should know, but everything he has been ignoring for so long. And then he gives up.

Turns away.

~

And then I am invisible again.

My retrieving of the bag does nothing to bring me into the foreground. Instead, I'm pushed further back. Back and back and back and back until I am nothing more than a ghost haunting the Arcara household, trying to grab their attention but always fading because I am not real. I am not real. Not here.

Mum hasn't forgiven me. I told her about the man, about the money and the way his skin sunk deep into his pale cheeks (but not the shaking, not the stilling), and she shook her head. Told me that I should never give money to people I don't know. She doesn't care that the man didn't even take it.

'You don't know what they're going to do with it,' she said. 'Money like that can ruin a person like that's life.'

I don't understand. I just don't understand.

Dad isn't proud. He likes to remind me of the panic, the *pandemonium* he says, I caused on the beach that day. They thought I drowned in the rough surf. They thought I had been kidnapped and murdered and dug deep beneath the sand where no one would ever find me.

‘You should’ve come and gotten me,’ he said, watching some shark documentary. ‘A little boy like you can’t do anything.’

And then he smiled. Smiled like the sharks in his documentary. He reminds me of a shark. Sharp teeth, beady eyes, sniffing out the smallest of cuts and making them bigger and bigger with his pin-needle teeth, digging deep into my skin, my heart, my existence. He likes tearing people apart.

For a while, Jake didn’t talk to me. When he finally did, three days later, he said four words: ‘I thought you’d left.’

I don’t know how, but I could hear the words he wanted to add but couldn’t. *Without me*, he wanted to say, *I thought you’d left without me*.

‘But I wouldn’t,’ I said to him, even though he wouldn’t look at me. ‘I wouldn’t leave.’

*I wouldn’t leave without you, Jake.*

Part of me wishes I could. Revenge for the years of shrug-offs and turning shoulders. But I know I can’t. Jake doesn’t like it here. He doesn’t like Dad. He thinks Mum is too idle. He thinks the apartment is too small and the city too loud and the people too shallow. I don’t know what he thinks about me. Sometimes, I think that he hates me. Other times, I remember that he was never taught anything but how to detach.

That’s why Erin broke up with him. Jake dated Erin Solomon for two years. They go to the same school, but met officially at Bondi one day, Jake volunteering and Erin surfing. I thought they were perfect for each other. She was bright, brave, strong and witty, always laughing and always smiling and always stealing the eyes of everyone in the room without even noticing. He was stoic, intelligent, well-spoken and too big for

this Earth, something about him intriguing like an unsolvable puzzle. Who was Jake Arcara? No one really knows. I don't know.

I overheard what Erin said to him that night – the night it all ended.

'I love you, Jake,' she said, and I could imagine her holding his hand, but I couldn't imagine him holding hers. 'But I'm not sure that you realise that. I'm not sure that you love me. Something in your head is always just floating, just out of view and out of touch. And I can't reach it. You won't let me. And that's why...' Her voice cracked. She took a deep breath, preparing to leap into the rapids and be swept away forever and ever. 'And that's why *this* isn't working anymore.'

Sometimes I think that Jake wasn't meant to be born a human. Perhaps a spirit, an angel, a god, but not a human. He's just too big for his body, for the rest of the world.

And that's why I wish I could leave him behind. Because I know he already has done the same to me, whether he realises it or not.

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I don't tell them about how the man collapsed. How I left him alone with that nice lady because I was scared and didn't know what to do and didn't want to be there when he died because I'm not strong enough to deal with the pain that would crawl like constricting, thorned, carnivorous vines into the empty void he left on the Earth. No, I keep that for myself.

~

It's the night before the swimming carnival. I don't think I'll be able to sleep. The tension is too high, my nerves too present, the man too *here* in my mind.

Dad doesn't want me to go to the carnival. He hasn't said it, but I know that's what he's thinking. But if I don't go, I'll lose it all. I'll lose the only thing that makes me feel strong.

We are sitting on the couch. There are two couches. Dad sits on one, stretched out with a beer in hand, watching the TV with his eyes but not his mind. Jake, Mum and I sit on the other, shoulder to shoulder, the sticky heat of the summer eating us up and sucking us dry. We are watching the news. I don't like the news. It makes me feel heavy, the droning reporter sapping up every slither of joy I have left with their depressing stories about crime and death and sickness and carnage. Dad likes it though, so we watch it with him.

'A twenty-two year old man has died on last night after he collapsed on Bondi Beach last week due to heat stroke,' the reporter says. 'With his death, emergency services want to emphasise the importance of sun protection and the dangers of extended heat exposure, especially with the current heat wave afflicting Sydney and surrounding –'

Mum turns off the TV.

'Let's get some takeaway,' she says, standing abruptly from the couch and walking towards the kitchen. 'Chinese, anyone?'

Dad grumbles but stands anyway. Jake moves quickly, eager to get to the kitchen before Dad does. I wait a moment, staring into the ink pool of the TV screen, wondering, understanding, realising. In that second as I sit alone on the couch, looking

into the deep, endless black of the screen, into the eyes of my reflection, I wish I could fall away. I wish I could drown.

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When I wake up the next morning, I see the man in the corner of my room. Lurking. Floating. Skin red and sunken and bones poking through his clothes. Vomit on his chin. Eyes red. Hands shaking.

I shut my eyes. Close them tight. Wish the demons away. When I open them, I'm alone again.

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The pool's surface reflects everything. Me and my togs. Josh Maxon and his crooked nose. The other nameless competitors. I feel sorry for them. They don't stand a chance. Not against Josh. Not against me. Not against the pool and its never ending expanse.

To most kids at my school, the swimming carnival isn't a big deal. To them, it means sunshine and food and laughs, maybe a ribbon if they're lucky. But to kids like me, like Josh, it's the decider. Who is better. Who deserves to be on the swim team, and who won't be invited back.

Mum's in the stands, watching. I want to make her proud. I have to win.

Fingers grip the edge of the platform. I wait for Mr Baker to pull the trigger. It's the 100 metre butterfly. I know I can beat Maxon. I know I can. I know I have to.

I can hear him breathing next to me. I want him to stop.

*Bang!*

There are three steps to a perfect dive, Jake told me.

‘First, there’s the on-block phase,’ he said, standing on the block before lowering into a crouch. ‘One foot forward, the other back. Grip the top with the tips of your fingers.’ He looked at me. ‘You following?’

I nodded.

‘Then, there’s the flight stage – the moment from when your toe leaves the block to when you hit the water,’ he said. ‘And then, the underwater phase – the most important. You see, the person with the quickest reaction time doesn’t necessarily have the quickest start. You gotta maintain your velocity in the water, time your first kick perfectly, and make sure you’re not too deep in the water as well. You practice it enough, and it’ll be like breathing.’ Easy for him to say. Jake had the best start in his squad.

So, after Mr. Baker pulls the trigger, I dive in. Hold glide. First kick after 6.5 metres. Surface at 10.5.

And then it begins. Kick. Pull. Recover. Kick. Pull. Recover. Lose myself in echo of the water pulsing around me. Lose myself in the movement. Kick. Pull. Recover. Imagine I’m Michael Phelps cutting through the water, chin skimming the surface, breathing every stroke even though my coach told me not too. See the end approaching. Both hands touch the wall. Both feet too. Propel off. Dolphin kick. Kick. Pull. Recover. Kick. Pull Recover.

And touch the wall.

I surface, checking my surroundings to see Maxon pull up in the lane next to me. Others trail behind. The time keeper hands me a token. Number one.

Cheers envelope me; cheers that usually fill me with such satisfaction and power. But now, I am empty. I am not real. I look pass the time keeper and I see him in the shadows under the tree. The man. I blink and he is gone.

He has taken something of mine with him.

~

After I get my ribbon, I walk back alone to my house area. I'm in Kennedy, which is the red house. I'm not sure why the school thought they had to give each house a fancy name. It sounds dumb.

Jake is one of the Kennedy captains, his co-captain being Angela McCartin. Angie isn't a very good swimmer, but she's super competitive and is always cheering on everyone in Kennedy from the sidelines and tries to compete in every race she can. Now, the two of them are trying to find fill-ins for races. A lot of people don't show up to the carnival, even if they've already signed up for events, which means that people like me have to fill in for them. Jake's always making me fill in for races. He knows I can't say no.

I walk over to my towel where Maggie and Sam, my friends, are waiting for me. Maggie Solomon is Erin's little sister. We became friends while Jake and Erin were dating, and even though they've broken up we still hang out together. She's always helping me with my Maths homework, and I'm always helping her with English. Jake doesn't like me hanging out with her so she can't come to our apartment anymore, but Erin has always liked me so I'm allowed over at hers. The Solomon household is much

calmer than mine. No tension. No collapsing walls. Everything is clean and everything, everyone, works together in perfect harmony.

Sam Edwards has been my best friend ever since we moved to the city. He has a massive crush on Maggie, always blushing and fumbling when she's in the room, but always loud and bragging and laughing when she's not. He has a big family, slightly chaotic and always disorganised. I love the Edwards. They're everything I wish we were.

'Amazing, Eli! You really showed Joshy boy who's boss,' Sam says, standing up from his towel and clapping me on the shoulder. His smile is genuine – wide and bright, reaching his eyes.

'They announced who's in the final race while you were in the water,' Maggie says, still on her towel.

The last race is invitation only. Those with the eight best freestyle times compete for a trophy and extra points for their house in a 50 metre freestyle race. Jake won last year. He's almost impossible to beat.

'And...? Who's in?' I ask.

'Jake's in, of course. Lane four. Josh is in lane six.' Sam says the last name with bite. He hates Josh Maxon, although I'm not sure why. I think he hates him because he used to pick on me, but ever since I punched him, Josh hasn't done anything to warrant any hatred. It's like he has sunk into himself. Or maybe I punched him into himself. Either way, now all he is to me is competition. My arch-nemesis in the water. The Chad Le Clos to my Michael Phelps.

'And you're in lane two.'

*Beat.*

‘Wait, I got in?’

Maggie nods. ‘Of course you did. You’re, like, amazing at swimming.’

And I’m happy that I got in. Year Sevens usually don’t get into the race because the older kids are better, faster, so two getting in is amazing. But now it is more than a race. More than a competition to see who is better and who will be asked to join the swimming squad.

Because I am competing against my brother.

~

Before I know it we are lined up on the blocks. The girls raced before us. Erin won. No surprises there.

I stand behind my block, waiting for Mr. Asai to come around and interview us. Jake catches my eye from the right. Nods his head. A silent understanding passes between us. One of us will win. No hard feelings if he beats me. A silent grudge if I beat him.

Mr. Asai approaches with his microphone and speaks to the Year 10 to my right. James Thurston, a boy so loud and obnoxious that everyone but him realises that all of his friends hate him. As Asai introduces him, James rocks back and forth on his heels, passing a look my way. A look that says *I will crush you*. Jake has told me about him before. Said that he thinks he’s better than he really is.

After James speaks loudly into the microphone, Asai moves to me. My heart thumps.

‘Here we have newcomer Eli Arcara,’ Mr. Asai says, as bright and smooth as ever. He’s a history and PE teacher, and is also my homeroom teacher. Relaxed and always happy, he is one of the best teachers in the school. He continues, ‘So, how are you feeling, Eli? Think you can beat your big brother?’

I gulp. I feel Jake’s eyes on me. ‘I feel... I think that I can try...?’

‘Oh, come on, Eli!’ Mr. Asai says. He holds my gaze, a silent encouragement flickering in his irises. ‘Don’t be so modest!’

‘Okay...’ I say. Eyes of the crowd, of my competition, prickle my skin. Expecting. Waiting. Holding their breath. ‘I think that if I try hard enough, I may be able to...’ I cast a look Jake’s way. He nods at me. *Go on*, he’s saying, *say it. Challenge the ocean*. I take a deep breath. ‘I think I can beat him.’

Someone cheers. Sam, I think. Others catch on, cheering louder and louder, whistling and clapping. It embraces me. My heart soothes. I’m the underdog. Everyone loves an underdog. They *want* me to win.

Asai claps me on the shoulder as he passes onto the next competitor.

And suddenly, I have a chance. I can beat the ocean.

The boy in the third lane is shy and doesn’t say much, so Asai moves to Jake.

‘Now we move to defending champion, Jake Arcara,’ Asai announces. The crowd cheers. They all love Jake. As the cheers hush, Asai continues, ‘So, what do you think about your little brother making it in his first year?’

Jake smiles. It reminds me of Dad’s smile. ‘I’m proud of him,’ he says. ‘But, I’m not going to go easy on him.’ And I know he won’t. He’s competitive to his very core. No matter who his competition is, he will do his best to crush them.

‘Didn’t think you would,’ Asai says. He moves on to Josh Maxon, who mumbles into the microphone, not quite sure what he’s saying but knowing he has to say something heroic in order to be loved by the crowd.

I look to the end of the pool. There’s Mum. She’s wearing her blue summer dress and sunglasses that make it impossible to tell if she’s looking at me or Jake or neither. I hope she’s looking at me. Sometimes, she’s the only one who sees me. I think it’s because she is as small as I am in the eyes of Dad and Jake, as quiet and unassuming. We are the small ones, the glass on the beach, the bottlecaps hiding away, while Dad and Jake are the sharks in the water, the twenty foot waves, the ocean itself. We must keep seeing each other or we’ll both vanish for good.

Maggie and Sam are waving at me from the edge of the pool. They see me, too. I love them for that.

I can feel Josh’s gaze on me. I meet it. We see each other. Even though he hates me, even though I punched him, we still see each other. Strange. I don’t think he has many friends. Maybe he doesn’t have many people to see him and that’s why he is so intent on being my rival, on beating me and showing me up. Maybe it’s because it’s the only way he can be something to anyone. And maybe that’s why he got so angry when I told him that he was loved no matter what – because he didn’t feel loved by anyone. Should I apologise? Should I try and help him?

(But the last time I tried to help someone was when I tried to help that man. The man who is dead. The dead man who died because of heat stroke. Heat stroke is treatable. He shouldn’t have died. I should have done more. Shouldn’t have chased him, that just made it all worse. Made him sicker. Pushed him closer to death. Should have

let him be. If it weren't for me he would still be alive. If it weren't for me he would still be alive. If it weren't for me he would still be – )

'Good luck, boys!' Mr. Asai says, and suddenly Mr. Baker is readying the starter gun and yelling *ready!* and everyone is crouching on the block and I am not ready for this. I am not ready to race against Jake. I am not ready to challenge the ocean.

I look at Mum. She smiles and waves. So I crouch with the rest of them, try to steady my breathing, remembering the steps for a perfect dive and trying to lose myself in my reflection in the water.

I may not be ready, but this may be the only chance I get.

Need to win. Need to be seen. Need to prove myself. Need to be something more than a little boy, too small for this too big universe, not powerful enough to snatch his father's attention away from his glistening lover enveloping the horizon, the whispering of its waves only for him.

The gun goes off. I dive.

~

It's eight in the morning. I'm sitting on my bed, reading one of Dad's crime books he loves so much. I don't like it. Everyone hates everyone, no one trusts anyone, no one tells the truth. The worst kind.

Exhaustion pounds my head. Mum drove Jake and I home from the swimming carnival, smiling madly as she congratulated us both on our individual achievements, Jake gazing out the window with his head in his chin and me smiling back, nodding and clutching the trophy close to my thumping chest.

Jake's trophy.

I was a close second according to the time keeper, but no one could beat Jake. Everyone knew he was destined for great things. Big things. Too big for us.

And I'm okay with that. I won't be the one to hold him back, to guilt him into staying when (not if) he decides to leave for good by reminding him of how he has failed repeatedly to be the big brother I deserved. Seeing how happy he was when he found out he won, seeing how happier he was when he found out that I came second, revealed to me something he has kept long hidden. A true smile. A true, eye-reaching smile that had been stored away for too long.

After the awards ceremony, he pulled me aside.

'I'm proud of you, Eli,' he said. 'You're really something in the pool. When you're my age, I bet you'll be even better than I am.'

Being better than Jake never crossed my mind. Only being equal. Only being seen.

He looked down to his feet. 'I realise that I haven't been the best brother around...'

I chuckled under my breath.

'And I know that I can't really make up for any of it. Not now,' he continued. It was true. He can't. Too late. Always too late. 'But... well, after you went missing on the beach, while we were looking for you, it kinda stirred a lot of memories I'd forgotten from when we were younger. You know, when I was teaching you how to swim and you couldn't dive for shit but eventually you got, like, scary good?'

I did remember. I remembered everything.

‘And then it sorta hit me that we didn’t have moments like that anymore, and then I realised that I was the reason for that,’ he said. I thought back to the way his eyes glistened when came back to our spot on the beach. They looked like that now, and his lower lip trembled. He really cared. He really did. No one ever taught him how to show it. He’s too much like Dad. He’s becoming, or maybe he always has been, the person he hates the most. He continued: ‘So, I’m sorry, Eli. I really am. I just thought that... I just thought that –’

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ I said, because I already knew. ‘I don’t hate you. I could never hate you. I just wish we were closer.’

He nodded. Nodded like the weight of his thoughts was forcing his head down and he was trying to lift it back up. Nodded like he knew.

But he didn’t. He couldn’t see the man standing in the shade behind him, looking at me with his red eyes, body twitching in death. The man who would never let me let him go. The man who I failed. My heart jumped. Tried to break through my chest. I wanted to forget. I wanted to forget. Let me forget.

‘What’s wrong, Eli?’

Let me forget.

I blink and he’s gone. ‘Nothing.’

Mum came and found us, congratulating us before leading us to the car. Jake turned to me before he got into the passenger seat.

‘Can you hold this?’ he asked, holding out the trophy. ‘My hand’s getting sore.’

So I did.

~

I put down my book and decide to walk. Dad is somewhere, Mum in the kitchen, Jake in the living room. I slip pass them easily and walk out the door.

The day is still like he was. Hot, sticky, sucking up every single drop of moisture in my skin and drinking it up. Never satisfied. Never happy. I walk the familiar path towards Bondi. Down Campbell Parade. Looking into each café and store as I walk. See the faces pass, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, all with lives going on in the background noise.

I know what I've come for.

I stop outside a café called *Coffee Vibes*. I've been here before – Mum took me here for Mothers' Day last year. She said they have the best coffee on Campbell Parade.

I know who I've come for.

She's waiting tables. Waltzing from customer to customer with practiced movements, so graceful and so swift, hair falling in front of her face and eyes tired. Every customer looks up at her and smiles when she approaches, some know her name, others read her nametag.

*Jamie*. Her name is Jamie.

I sit down by myself at the closest spare table. The only one out in the sun. If I sit out here long enough, will I crumple and thrash like the man did?

Another waitress sees me. She approaches cautiously, unsure of what a boy my age would be doing out here alone, unsure if everything is okay, unsure if she needs to do something to help. I look at her nametag. Anna.

'Hi there!' Anna says, hesitating before placing down the menu. 'Are you waiting for someone?'

I nod. 'I'm waiting for Jamie.'

'Is that your sister, or your girlfriend?'

'No. She's over there, waiting tables.' I nod over to where Jamie floats back and forth.

Anna blinks once. Twice. And then says: 'I'll go get her for you.'

Please do. Because I can still feel him. Lurking. Floating behind me. Breathing down my neck. And I need Jamie to tell me the truth. I need her to save me because I know no one else can. Mum doesn't understand. Jake doesn't understand. Dad won't listen. He never listens. He can't see me. He can't see me and yet I can see everyone.

I look to the menu. The basic stuff: eggs and bacon, French toast, pancakes with blueberries, something called acai. I don't have any money, but my stomach grumbles, hungry for anything. Food. Closure. Release. Love.

Someone pulls out the chair. It scrapes over the concrete, screaming out and making me flinch.

'I remember you,' Jamie says. Her eyes are a dark brown, infinite pools of nothing and everything at the same time. 'You're the boy who ran away.'

The boy who ran away. The boy who was scared. The boy who was the blunt glass on the shore.

'Why are you here? How did you find me?' she asks, but she sounds concerned. Concerned for me.

'I remembered your shirt,' I say. 'And I need to know...'

What do I need to know?

'Know what?' she asks, head tilted slightly to the side as she tries to get into my head, figure me out, decide whether or not I am more than just the boy who ran away.

What is it I need to know? What can she tell me that will release me, that will rid me of the man always in front, always behind, always inside of me?

‘I need to know if I failed him.’

Taken aback, Jamie takes a while to answer, mouth smacking open and shut like his did that day. Open. Shut. Open. Shut. Open –

‘You didn’t fail him,’ she says, pulling her chair in closer and bringing a thumb to my cheek, wiping away the tears I didn’t know were there. She smiles at me.

Genuine. True. Warm. Everything I want to be. ‘You moved him into the shade, didn’t you?’

I nod. More tears come but I wipe them away before she react.

‘That was vital in saving him, kid. You helped save him.’

*Beat.*

‘But – He died! I saw it on the news! I killed him because I didn’t know what I was doing and I left him there –’

‘He’s not dead.’

*Beat.*

‘The paramedics came soon after you left,’ Jamie says, soft and still and trying to calm me down. ‘They took him to hospital and they saved him. The guy on the news... he was someone else. It was a hot day – heaps of people probably got heat stroke.’

And I don’t know what to say. The man is alive. I didn’t kill him. He’s not dead. He’s not dead. He’s not –

‘I have his phone number, if you wanted to talk to him.’

*Beat.*

‘Really?’ The man is no longer behind me.

‘Yeah.’ Jamie pulls out her phone, taps away and pushes it towards me. On the screen is a contact. His name is Patrick. ‘I can call him and you can talk to him, if you want.’

Part of me wants to run away. Run away again. Far, far away where no one can reach me. But the other part nods and watches as Jamie dials in the number and greets the person on the other side of the line. She smiles at me and says: ‘There’s someone who wants to talk to you. Hope you don’t mind.’

And she hands me the phone. I hold it to my ear and I hear his voice. Alive.

‘Hello? Who’s this?’

My mouth is dry.

‘Hello?’ Patrick repeats. ‘Are you there?’

‘Hi,’ I say, surprised at how small I sound. ‘My name’s Eli. You stole my Mum’s bag.’

*Beat.*

‘You’re the kid who tried to give me money,’ Patrick says, not to me but to himself. ‘You were there when I, uh, collapsed, right? Sorry about that. I should know better than staying out in the sun for so long.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Huh?’ He didn’t expect that.

‘I’m sorry I ran away. I’m sorry that I left you –’

‘You have nothing to be sorry for, kid,’ Patrick says, and he is genuine. He is real. ‘I’m the one who stole your bag. I’m the thief. You’re the kid who tried his best, and that’s what counts.’

‘But I didn’t –’

‘Don’t argue here, Eli.’ His words are stern but his voice is gentle. ‘In my eyes, in the eyes that count, you are a kid who wanted to give some thief money to help him get better. You are a kid who saw something terrible and scary and was frightened because he didn’t know what to do. You pulled me into the shade, right?’

I nod. Then remember he’s on the phone. ‘Yes.’

‘The paramedics said that if I had been in the sun for a little while longer, the damage to my body, to my brain, could have been irreversible. So, if anything, you are a hero, kid. You saved my life.’

And then I cry.

~

Bluebottles, even with their little bodies, hold so much power. Small, unassuming, but fighters. Conquerors of tourists. Challengers orbited by their own little solar system of friends and family. I don’t understand why the world can’t see it. Why they can’t see the power, the wisdom, the beauty dwelling in vessels so small, so simple.

The man taught me something. You don’t have to be bigger than the ocean to save someone. To be someone. All you have to do is see.

See the glass on the beach. See the bluebottles tucked away in the sand. See the rival who doesn’t feel loved. See the girl who kneels beside you and rubs your back. See the brother who is perched somewhere too high to reach. See the mother who loves you more than everything. See the father who is blind to the world around him. See the thief who collapsed in the park and stilled and then woke.

See the boy who will do anything to become something more.