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**This is
Where
We Say
Goodbye**

Howard McKenzie-Murray



FREMANTLE PRESS

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I HONESTLY DON'T KNOW WHERE the frig to start, guys. All I want to do is tell you about this one day last September when I snapped like a twig – my twenty-first birthday actually – but the problem is that that makes me think of something that happened before, and *that* reminds me of something else, and the next thing you know I'll be giving you a minute-by-minute account of me as a fetus. Maud the fetus. That'd be great. Just the diary of this tiny, beautiful fetus wondering what the world's going to be like and getting excited for the big day. I wonder if fetuses do get excited. I wouldn't put it past them. You think they're putting their feet up in there but they actually don't stop. You're probably never busier in your whole life than when you're a fetus. That's a medical fact. You can trust me, I'm basically a doctor.

I don't know if you really want to hear about all this stuff that happened to me, but if you don't then all you have to do is put it down. Like, no one's got a gun to your head. Unless they make it mandatory reading in schools. I'd love that. Millions of

kids being forced to read to this garbage. And it's not going to be an action-packed thriller either, by the way, with spies and explosions and all that. I don't think anything explodes. Unless you count me. *I* explode. I'm not kidding. I'm still finding bits of me all over the neighbourhood. But all I'm saying is that if you're just into explosions, you're barking up the wrong tree here. I don't know how writers come up with such interesting stuff. I have this scarily bad imagination. When I try to imagine something – say a dog – all I see is blackness. I'm jealous if someone can just picture a *dog*.

I was sick all September. I was on about my sixth flu for the year and I was getting over a UTI and I had *three* mouth ulcers. Basically one leg already in the grave. And that's how I turned twenty-one. You'll get a kick hearing how I spent my twenty-first birthday. I was hiding out in the laundromat on Bannister Street in Fremantle by myself. Not really how I saw my twenty-first, to be honest. I didn't even have clothes to wash or anything. I went there to get away from everyone and to write a letter to my brother. I needed a place free of distractions so I could get the letter over with once and for all, say everything I wanted to, and move on with my life. And I couldn't go home and do it there because I'd promised my housemate, Winnie, that we'd have birthday drinks, and she'd be waiting for me. I could've done without the drinks. Her heart's in the right place, don't get me wrong, but she corners you into stuff. You know those people? They let you know how much they're looking forward to it and they go overboard preparing for it so then you feel like you *have* to do it. She's like that. So you set a date to have

a relaxing drink, but it feels more like a crushing black cloud hanging over your head all week.

A laundromat has got to be one of my favourite smells. It makes you feel so clean and pure. It's like hitting the reset button on life a bit. Plus you can sit there for hours on a cold night without anyone getting on your case. All you have to do is look annoyed – as if you've got better things to do but you have to wait for the stupid cycle to finish. It started raining as soon as I stepped foot inside. Hammering down.

Coming in from the freezing cold night, I felt this solid wall of hot, humid air from the tumble dryers smack me in the face at the door. My face flushed and my nose was instantly running like a tap. There were three rows of radioactive-green hard plastic chairs and a long silver bench in the middle where a man in a blue waterproof poncho was delicately folding his washing in a way that made me wish I was the linen being folded neatly and placed in a bag to be taken home and put lovingly in a drawer. He stopped to look at me and then went back to his dainty folding. The windows were steamed up on the inside and some car headlights passed blurrily by. Apart from the man in the poncho, two others were waiting for their clothes. I sat down with my back to the window across from a squirrely guy who was going for the cowboy look. He stopped biting his thumbnail and wiped the thumb on his flannelette shirt. I pulled my uni notebook and a pen out of my bag, opened to a blank page and hunched in. Ready for the letter to come flowing out. But nothing happened. I just got itchy.

I didn't have a coat or a rain jacket either. I'd gone out in just

my purple turtleneck and it was already driving me up the wall. I only had my bra on underneath and the alpaca wool was so prickly that I knew from the second I sat down I was going to spend the whole night scratching. I was furious. I was close to ripping the turtleneck off and sitting there in my bra – except I'd never actually do that in a million years. You could tell people were thinking I had fleas and I'd come to wash the fleas out of my clothes. No one wanted a bar of me. It was lucky I was in my black culottes because at least they're halfway comfortable. I'm quite small, quite *petite*, and I wouldn't've thought I could pull off wide-leg culottes. I had it in my head that they'd make me look like this absolute tree-stump, but they *so* don't. I love them. And I'm pretty much swimming in all that extra room I have. I could fit a watermelon in my pocket if I had to. I know that these days everyone's walking around in cropped, ankle-length culottes but I don't care. I still love them. My ankles pop out the bottom like these exquisite, slender twigs.

Between the spinning dryers and the sound of buttons clinking against the glass doors of the washing machines you could hear the downpour outside. All in all, it was a pretty good place to do what I came to do, which was to write that stupid letter to my brother. So I turned the page in the notebook even though I hadn't touched the one I was looking at and I told myself that no matter what, I'd finish the frigging letter before I left. Just get it over with. Pop the old heart on the sleeve and move on with my life.

The whole thing was my cousin Max's idea. She's *the* Max Gladstone. You've probably heard of her. She used to be a tennis

player but after whupping Serena Williams at Wimbledon last year that was the end of her playing career. She got too popular and now she's always doing TV ads for anti-fungal socks and chewing gum. I swear, every time I turn on the TV she's telling me that those anti-fungal socks are 'ace'. I think she manages to fit in a couple of games a year. I don't get that. Don't they give her enough millions playing tennis? I would love to call her up and be like 'hey, I saw you selling socks on TV. Do you need some money? I mean, I'm a med student and I can barely afford one piece of sushi a day but I'm sure I could spare something'. How good would that be?

Anyway, she called out of the blue from Sydney when she heard about Lloyd, and told me I 'just had to' write him a letter. And I should stick in all the stuff I wanted to say to him. Really 'let loose'. They're *her* words. 'Let loose'. As if I hated his guts or something. As if I was seething. But the idea was that you write like he was alive and could write back. She even said to *mail* it. I must have rocks in my head to have listened to her. Everyone's suddenly full of advice when someone dies. People start chucking books at you. Anything with 'death' in the title.

I'm not kidding about that, by the way. The woman who's lived next door to my mum and dad forever popped by to give me a book by Ernest Hemingway called *Death in the Afternoon*. I swear to God it was just about bullfighting. Start to finish bulls. It was just bulls, bulls, bulls. I read it to take my mind *off* the whole thing. Suddenly I was this bullfighting expert. O and they send you quotes. That's the worst. The take-each-day-at-a-time and the they're-with-you-in-your-heart quotes.

Anyway, Max had barely got on the phone when she had to go again – she must have had another anti-fungal sock ad to shoot – but after a day or two I realised how much time I spent sitting around talking to Lloyd when I was by myself. *Hours*. I couldn't stop. So I thought it wouldn't kill me to give it a try. That's what I was doing at the laundromat anyway.

I sat on that chair staring at an empty page in my notebook for a whole hour. If you've ever sat in one of those hard plastic laundromat chairs five minutes you can imagine what a whole hour can do. My ass was asleep all the way down to my knees. I thought I might be in a wheelchair with stumps the rest of my life. People would be like 'O, were you in a horrible car accident?' or 'did you fall out of a sixth-floor hotel room?' and I'd be like 'nope, I sat in a laundromat chair for an hour'. I've never had a case of pins and needles that bad in my life. Anyway, at the end of the hour the page was still blank so I hopped up to get the blood circulating and looked out the window as a blue neon *West End Medical* sign turned off for the night.

There were still three of us in the laundromat. A lady in blue flannel pyjamas and a mangy canary-yellow bathrobe with her hair in curlers was reading a pulp-fiction book. She even had a few overnight pimple patches on her chin and an ugg boot up on the chair. She couldn't have been more relaxed if she was on her bed with the door shut. People like that amaze me. I can't be that relaxed when I'm literally *in* my bedroom. With a padlock on the door.

Then there was the cowboy guy sitting across from me in a tucked-in flannelette shirt, leather jacket and some pointy

leather boots. He was one of those spindly types who look like they've never picked up a dumbbell in their life. He had patchy facial hair and an old cold sore on his upper lip and he must have liked the way he looked rolling his cigarette because he spent half an hour rolling one and then stuck it behind his ear.

He kept looking at me and then down at the floor and shaking his head. For some reason there were all these feathers scattered around me on the blue-and-white tiled floor. A heap of them. I asked the cowboy the time because my phone was dead. He sighed like I was asking him to change all the tyres on my car. Really slowly, he pushed his sleeve up a whole centimetre and told me it was ten-thirty.

After what felt like another hour had gone by, I asked him the time again. It was only ten minutes later. He looked like he wanted to knock my teeth out for that one.

The reason I was asking was because Frankie, my oldest brother, was coming home from California that night. His plane got in at eleven and I wanted to know if he was here yet. Frankie had called me up a couple nights before and we got into a big argument. I hung up on him and everything. He kept calling me 'Our Lady of the Suds' because I was in the bath. He kept asking if I was with Francis of Assisi and how Francis of Assisi was doing and whether Francis of Assisi was enjoying his time in the suds too. When I hung up he tried to call back but I was done with him.

I opened the notebook back up like I meant business. It was Heart-on-Sleeve time. No fooling around. I got this wind in my sails and wrote *Dear Lloyd*. Then I stiffened up. I sat there on

Dear Lloyd for another ten minutes staring at the page. Then I wrote:

This is Max's idea. I'm pretty sure reading mail is on the list of Things You Can't Do Once You're Dead. I'll have to check my first-year textbooks but I'm pretty sure that's there. I think the medical definition of death is: 'Irreversible cessation of brain stem function and inability to read mail'. Before they had EEGs to check if someone was dead, they'd stick some mail in the dead guy's hands and wait to see if he started trying to write a response.

Total garbage, I know. You don't have to tell me. But bear in mind that I was rusty at the whole letter-writing thing.

What really punched me in the breadbasket was that Lloyd was the one person in the world I should've been able to say something to. I could barely talk since it happened. I suddenly couldn't think of anything to say to anyone. And when other people talked it hurt my ears. I was considering going around in earmuffs. The only stuff I could really talk about was stuff that had nothing to do with anything – like medical facts.

I think that's what that dumb fight on the phone with Frankie was all about, to be honest. I'd been this gigantic idiot for thinking I might be able to have a halfway honest conversation with him. We hadn't talked properly in years and Frankie's got this annoying thing where you're still the same age you last were when you talked on the phone. He won't update his idea of you. Absolutely refuses. In his head, no time has passed on your end since the last conversation. So for him I'm about