**Mal Vu**

You are fourteen when your dad moves the family halfway across the country to a place called River View. The name is a broken promise: your flat looks out onto other homes and a tyre factory that closed when the jobs were outsourced somewhere cheaper. But the rubber smell lingers, acrid and slightly sweet.

After the crash, the developers who named this stretch of land in hope of turning it into a suburb ran out of money, so the only buildings are River View Apartments, the old factory, and a half-demolished block that once housed its workers. One petrol station, one supermarket. The town proper, a mile away, is small and unlovely.

Your father is smiling with all his teeth in two hard rows as he pulls up to the peach-coloured complex. Your mother clutches her handbag and pulls on her cigarette with tight lips, and when you ask what's wrong, she says everything's fine. You are not stupid. 'I'm not stupid,' you say, but the undisguised horror in her eyes shuts you up.

The flat is smaller than your old house. Your mother covers magnolia with white and turns the balcony into a jungle of plastic vines and potted plants. 'See? Just needed a lick of paint,' your father says, slapping her back, and she nods, her mouth slack. Her new friends from church, women with dyed hair who come round to chat over endless mugs of tea, coo at what she's done with the place.

New girl. You start school halfway through term. Back home, your best friend was Mel, an awkward girl who lied about everything. You ate crisps and read magazines and talked about the boys you loved indiscriminately, your roving desire landing on them like dust. You miss the idea of Mel more than you miss her. Here, everyone already has friends. The shining girls in your class are Cora, Stephanie and Molly. You watch them whisper and laugh together, clenched with jealousy.

Summer brings a sultry, irritable heat. Your father perspires through his work shirts, your mother ices her wine. Your birthday gift is a yellow raincoat from the discount outlet which you pretend to love. You spend the rest of the holidays listless before the TV.

One soupy Saturday, a new family moves in next door: faded and harried-looking parents, two older boys in black tracksuits that nearly match. From the balcony you watch them unload bin bags and boxes from their van. When you suggest going over to say hi, your mother says they can introduce themselves if they like. They never do, but every evening you hear their TV through the wall.

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A month after they arrive, next door starts having guests over every night. At the kitchen table you listen to voices muffled by plasterboard as your mother adds sauce to pasta and jabs it with a spoon.

Your dad jerks his head at the wall. ‘Not even a hello, and now people round every night?’

‘A couple of friends is fine, but they’re so *rowdy*.’ Your mother’s freshly done hair quivers about her jaw. She is always talking about the importance of grooming.

‘I saw the mother in the supermarket last week,’ says your dad, a square of kitchen paper tucked into his shirt collar. You wonder if his new colleagues find his comedy ties funny, like you once did. ‘Strange woman.’

‘Strange how?’

He looks surprised, as though he’s forgotten you’re there. ‘Just strange. Gave me a nasty feeling. Like I’m not welcome in my own neighbourhood.’ This feels loaded with something, though you’re not sure what. Your mother raises her eyebrows. When you reach for seconds, she says you’ve had enough.

The sound of a glass shattering next door makes you all start. ‘Right, I’m going over,’ says your dad, though you can tell he doesn’t want to. He’s been different since getting laid off, as though life is a game he only just realised he might lose. You settle on the sofa with your mum to watch a show about rich housewives with smooth hair and pearly lipstick. You don’t wear makeup and your hair is no real colour or shape. Your mum bought you a lipstick once, but it was all wrong, its coral shade making you seem even paler somehow, fungal looking.

When he gets back, your dad points down the hallway and says, ‘Room’. You protest, the show’s not over, but he tells you not to start all that, so you do as he says. From bed, you hear them murmuring too quietly for you to catch anything. You’re still annoyed when your mum comes in to say goodnight.

‘What’s up with Dad?’ you say, but she tells you to go to sleep. For a moment you envy her. Sometimes it feels the gaps in your understanding are so vast, you don’t know anything at all.

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In gym, Cora lobs a ball that bends your finger back. You blink hard so no one will see you cry.

Stephanie corners you by the lockers after last bell. You focus on putting your algebra textbook away. You secretly like algebra, the symmetry of it, but in this subject and all others, your marks are average. She grabs your shoulder and spins you around. 'We're going to the park,' she says, 'Want to come?'

Panic flutters in your chest. 'My mum will worry if I don't come home.' You have begged for a mobile phone, but she hasn't given in yet.

'You're River View, right? Your new neighbour'll be there.'

Though you are intrigued, you mutter, 'I can't.'

Cora saunters over. 'You're not coming? Boring.' When she yawns, you smell her coconut lip-gloss, and in a snap of tropical fruit gum and slam of locker doors, they are gone.

Your mother is pacing the hallway when you get home. 'You didn't take the bus,' she says, her face creased with worry, 'It went past and you weren't on it.'

'I walked.'

'Jamie, you're to take the bus home every day.'

'But it stinks.' The bus's ripe fug of feet and farts is strongest near the back, where the boys sit.

'I don't care, you'll take the bus, you hear me?'

'Okay, okay.'

'Nobody came with you, did they?'

'Like who?'

'Never mind. You were on your own?'

'Yeah.'

'Yes,' she corrects, and reaches out for a hug, enveloping you with her floral perfume. Its familiar scent of Paris and romance stirs something inside you.

Taking the bins out, you sense someone watching, but when you raise your head, whoever was there has gone.

You can see the factory from your bedroom window, huge and incongruous like some mysterious ancient monument, its beige sides sheering up from the empty dirt. The day you moved in, your dad pulled the curtain back, magician-style, to reveal the view. His 'Isn't this great, pal?' was too cheery, but you said, 'Yeah!' as your mother pursed her mouth.

You watch from behind the curtain as they gather there: silky-haired Cora, Stephanie with her skinny limbs and insect eyes, and Molly, who is neither pretty nor thin but has huge boobs, which are a different kind of currency. Everyone says Molly's a slut; you aren't sure why. You haven't had sex yet. The one time you thought a boy was going to kiss you, he

chickened out. Still, you know plenty. In school the nurse told you about changing bodies, and once you found a magazine in your dad's bedside drawer with a naked woman on the cover. She was beautiful, with smooth skin and big lips. Your own fantasies of transforming into a beauty overnight feel so real that every time you wake up, the same as always, disappointment crushes you anew.

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Your mother's friends cup your chin in their hands and glance over your spotty skin and pale eyelashes as if searching for something. Once they've moved from tea to wine, they ask if you have a boyfriend yet.

One Saturday, your father takes you into town for lunch and a film. He lets you get dessert and a Coke and sweet popcorn – 'Don't tell your mother,' he says, and you bask in the adultness of a shared secret. Cora, Stephanie and Molly are in the lobby, drinking Diet Cokes with boys from the year above. You recognise the tallest, whose face is shiny and red from steroid creams. When you say 'Hi!' they wave back with practised nonchalance. Your dad tells you to go over if you like, but you say you need to pee and hurry out, your gaze fixed on the speckled carpet.

Reading on the balcony that evening, your stomach roiling from sugar, you feel eyes on you again. The younger of the boys who moved in next door is looking straight at you from his balcony. The bones and skin of his face seem to be made of finer stuff than your own. Dark rings beneath his eyes make him look tired, but in an interesting sort of way.

You lower your book from the ballet school series and say 'Hey' in a tone you hope sounds bored and cool.

'Hey. What're you reading?'

You hide it under your leg. 'Just something for school.'

'Mind if I hang here for a bit? Could use a break from everyone.'

'It's a free country,' you say – a line overheard from Cora you've been meaning to try out.

He takes in the spider plants your mother sprays twice a week, the pink trumpets of petunias. 'Nice garden.' You don't correct him. He extends a hand into the zone of your balcony, bitten nails fringed with shreds of bloody skin. 'I'm Amir.'

'Jamie.'

'Cool name.' It isn't, everyone says it's a boy's name. Amir chews a nail and says, 'You go to school with Cora and the other girls.'

'Yeah. Don't you?'

‘I’m done with school.’

‘Wow.’ Your face burns at the dumb word. ‘I’ll be finished in two years. Then I’m going to live in Paris.’

‘Paris?’

‘Or New York.’ You don’t know why you say that – it’s Paris you dream of, Paris where clear-skinned women carry bouquets through cobbled streets and laugh charmingly in cafés.

‘The Big Apple,’ Amir says, gazing across the peach complex as though it’s a glowing cityscape. The way he says it sounds terribly profound.

A call sounds from inside his flat. ‘I’d better head back.’

‘To the party.’

He gives you a funny look. ‘See you.’

But he doesn’t come the next day, or the one after. You picture him in the purple dusk and try to think of meaningful things to say next time, but you’re incapable of formulating original thoughts; every topic is just something from school. Voices rise from the factory at night. Perhaps he is there, you think, as you lie still and listen, imagining everyone dazzled by your wit; and as you mouth these conversations, cosseted by the duvet, they seem every bit as true as your current reality.

*

Eavesdropping on your parents, you learn that next door told your dad they weren’t having parties, they had visitors because the older brother died. The only dead people you’ve known are your grandfather on your dad’s side and a teacher who had cancer. You know it’s a different sort of tragedy when the person is young. In death’s shadow, Amir is different, too – intense, exotic.

The next time you see him you are hoisting rubbish bags into the bins.

‘I heard about your brother,’ you say, ‘I’m so sorry.’

He shrugs. ‘It is what it is, you know?’

You nod, though you don’t. But you need to say something. ‘Good you’ve had people round, though.’

He presses the toe of his right trainer into the ground. ‘My mum’s family. Everyone round here is so fucking rude all the time. Like they’ll catch something from us.’

‘That sucks.’ You blush, recalling your father’s nasty feeling. Strange woman.

‘Yeah. Well. What do you expect.’

You're not sure what to make of this but work your face into what you hope is an expression of fathomless sympathy. You have so many questions. 'How – how old was he?'

'Raf? Eighteen.'

'Oh. Do you miss him?'

Amir's features tighten and immediately you know you've said the wrong thing. He jerks his head at the trickle of bin juice on your hand and says, 'It's dripping.' You pull your sleeve down and hurry back upstairs, heart pounding.

Shaping hamburgers with your mother, you say, 'I met our neighbour. Amir. He's nice.'

She murmurs something. Bits of meat and onion cling to her fingers.

'What?'

'Don't say "what". I don't want you talking to him.'

'Why not?'

'You don't need to know my reasons for everything, Jamie. Do your homework.'

'I don't have any.' This isn't true, but your algebra questions seem stupid now.

'Watch TV, then.'

Later, from bed, you hear your mum shouting, 'I can't handle it here, Alan.' He tells her to keep her voice down. You picture Amir's fine-boned face as you touch yourself under the duvet, waiting for the blissful sensation to arrive. You learned how to do it by accident, almost. The enormous shaking feeling reminds you of the first time you went camping: everything glowed beneath a dome of stars, the silence so thick you could almost touch it, and you understood the world was not only home and school but a massive place with the power to awe and destroy you.

*

Shimmer of an autumn heatwave. Amir likes to come onto the balcony just when it's getting dark and you time your moments there to coincide with his. You've never experienced this kind of easy comfort around a boy before. He listens, and doesn't laugh at you, even when you say embarrassing things. You both have stay-at-home mums, dads who lost their jobs in the crash. And now you are both only children, though neither of you points this out. Your feeling for him is solid, real – nothing like the flimsy crushes you and Mel spent hours dissecting. Perhaps he sees something special in you, too, even if you are flat-chested.

One Saturday, you glimpse the girls at the factory and slip out. You walk fast, your yellow raincoat announcing you from afar. Cora and Stephanie sit with two boys on rusted metal drums and plastic chairs around a cold firepit.

You hover close, hands in pockets. ‘Hi,’ you say, louder than you intend.

‘Hi.’ Cora plays with a strand of silky hair and smiles, her teeth small and white. ‘Amir’s here, if you want to say hello.’

‘Oh, sure. If he’s about.’

She points to the factory. ‘Round there.’

You step lightly, sharp stones poking into your trainers, clouds of dust blooming at your feet. The factory is even bigger than it looks from your room. Rounding the building, you see Molly from behind. She’s kneeling in front of Amir, jacket spread under her knees, head working up and down. His eyes are closed and he kneads her boobs through her vest top like they’re dough.

Your face feels as though it’s been covered in layers of clingfilm. You speed back, warm all over. ‘Everything alright?’ says Stephanie, and you imagine twisting her skinny neck until it snaps.

‘Fine. I’ll be going, then.’ Your voice has gone taut, the way your mum’s does when she’s annoyed.

The boys smirk. The red-faced one is rolling a joint. ‘Stay, have a drink,’ says Cora, offering up a can.

You have never drunk alcohol before. As you gulp down the sugary cider you feel powerful and important. Triumphantly you hold up the empty can to admiring ‘Whoa’s from the boys. Amir and Molly look coy as they creep back, as if the cheering is for them, then Amir sees you and gives a little start.

‘I think you had an audience,’ says Stephanie. The others laugh and you join in though you don’t get the joke.

‘I didn’t really see anything. I’d better go.’

The way Molly stares makes you feel strange, queasy – or maybe it’s the cider working on you.

‘Amir wants to show you something,’ says Cora.

‘Uh, do I?’

‘Yeah, we’ve all seen it. Jamie should too.’

‘What?’ You wonder if he’ll take his dick out right there. You wouldn’t mind, only not now, not in front of everyone.

Cora eyes you slyly. ‘Did you know Amir’s brother was killed round here?’ Something about the way she says it unnerves you, like it’s a juicy bit of gossip.

‘Oh.’

Amir's closing his jacket against the wind, walking away, and you catch him up. He continues past the point you found them, onto a path running parallel to a dank stream. Sunbleached cans, crisp packets and desiccated turds dot the way. Perhaps this is the river of River View, a river you've never thought of as having a name.

When he stops at a scrubby patch, you lay your raincoat on the ground.

'What are you doing?' he says.

You sit as if on a picnic blanket. 'Nothing.'

'Raf was found here. Around here, anyway.'

You squeak out a pathetic 'Oh?' The earth feels unstable beneath you, as though it's turned liquid.

'Yeah. Police said it was a gang thing.'

You are shocked into quiet. Whenever there's a local story on TV, your father says the whole country's going to the dogs, but news has always been something that happens to other people.

'It wasn't,' Amir adds.

'That's awful.' You take out your ponytail, lean back on your elbows. 'Do you think they'll catch who did it?'

Amir kicks a stone and watches it fly. 'The cops, here? No way. They've got better things to do.'

You don't understand. All you can think to say is, 'I'm really sorry.'

'Yeah. Well. Not your fault.' He turns to face you and your whole body thrills with being looked at. When you flutter your eyelashes like the magazines say, everything goes blurry.

'Let's head back, your mum will be worried,' he says, and you nod with the unshakeable sense you've disappointed him somehow.

Back at the firepit, he flicks his eyes at the dishwater sky and says, 'It's gonna rain, I'm taking her home.' At the sight of Molly's stricken face you feel special, illuminated. You walk back to the complex in silence. When Amir says, 'See you soon, yeah,' and turns around without saying where he's going, you are bereft.

Your mother is drinking white wine on the sofa. She says, 'Why are you covered in dirt?' and now you are crying without quite knowing why. She holds you to her chest, strokes your hair, and says, 'It's okay, baby,' and for a moment you let yourself hope she's right.

*

You spend hours on the balcony playing games on your new phone, but weeks pass, the days cool, and Amir doesn't come.

In gym, Stephanie passes out cold on the tarmac. You've never seen someone faint in real life before; the transition from vertical to horizontal is sudden, shocking. The teacher shoos everyone off and carries her limp body away. Rumours multiply in the hothouse of school gossip: people say she's been eating only apples and carrots for months, like a horse. Diet Coke and gum. Cora and Molly deliver breathless updates by the lockers, glowing with attention.

From your bedroom you watch Molly lead a different boy behind the factory each week as Cora holds court around the firepit. You rub your fingers against your underwear every night, scared it won't work this time, that there is a limit to your private magic.

*

Daydreaming in the supermarket, you bump into Amir's mother. Her scarf is made out of a staticky looking material. She and Amir have the same rings under their eyes.

'Sorry, miss.'

'Hey, you're the girl from next door.'

'Yeah, I'm friends with Amir. I haven't seen him in a while.'

'You and me both. He's moved out. Not a word in weeks.'

You stare at the beans and frozen mac 'n' cheese in her basket, willing yourself not to cry. 'I'd better go,' you say. As you turn, you remember what Amir said about people being rude, but it's too late.

At dinner, you say, casually, 'I saw the mum from next door in the shop.'

Your father looks up from his roast lamb. 'What did you say to her?'

'Nothing. Just hello.' You don't want to think about Amir being gone.

'That whole family's bad news,' says your mother, chewing, 'People like that are exactly why we're moving.'

'Beth.' A warning in your father's eyes.

'What do you mean, people like that?'

'Never mind. The important thing is we're getting out of here.' And she says the name of a suburb you don't recognise.

'I don't want to move. I like it here.' You can hear the whine in your voice.

'Your dad has a new job. It'll be nicer, you'll see.'

'They're not bad news,' you say, picking at a spot on your chin. The breakouts have worsened to red lumps that no amount of scrubbing will remove.

‘Stop that, you’ll make yourself bleed. You don’t know the half of it with those people.’

Her blouse with its lemon print, the mascara clumped around her eyes, the smell of lamb – all of it repulses you. You mumble, ‘You make me sick,’ and your father stands and shouts, ‘You’ll apologise to your mother, right now,’ but you stomp to your room and slam the door. From the window you see Stephanie, out of hospital now, sucking on a Diet Coke. Amir’s there too, his arm around her. When did that happen? You really do feel sick.

You watch until he walks back and intercept him on the way in. His hair looks like it smells bad and his skin is oily. ‘Hey,’ you say, affecting indifference, but it comes out weirdly atonal.

‘Oh. Hey.’

‘Haven’t seen you in a while.’

‘I’ve moved in with a friend, just came to get some stuff. I hate this fucking place.’ The swearword is illicit on his tongue; your pelvis does a weird shivering thing. ‘I’ve got a job. I’m getting my own place when I have the money.’

You have a few twenties and change in the box under your bed. You’d give it all to him, if he asked.

‘Cool. Actually, we’re moving. My mum just told me.’

‘Really?’ He looks interested. ‘Where?’

You name the suburb, it’s not Paris or New York, but it’s something.

He kisses your cheek, leaving a smear of grease behind. ‘Well, stay in touch.’

For two days you don’t wash. That you forgot to get his number doesn’t matter: the kiss is a precious thing you carry inside your beating heart, and when you see the girls whispering in corridors and ignoring you, you don’t care – you are protected.

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Your parents find a repossessed house and get it for a song. Your dad says the phrase ‘fresh start’ four times on the drive over.

You make friends, sort of, with girls who trail chemical clouds of menthol cigarettes and Red Bull. Near your new school, in a development abandoned mid-construction, amid crumbling concrete and rebar sticking up randomly and pipes connected to nothing, you finally lose your virginity. The boy is in the year above; he has eczema and kisses by clamping his mouth over yours and jamming in his tongue. You feel you could split from the pain, like a lighting-struck tree. Afterwards, sore and dazed, you go to McDonald’s, where

his mates grin and slap his back while you slurp the milkshake and eat the chicken nuggets he buys you.

You still think of Amir often. Now you are older, you understand, and the urge to share this new knowledge weighs upon you, but don't know what you'd say, or to whom, so you stay quiet. Even if you were to say anything, no one would listen.