

Across a Fluky Sea

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PART 1: 1990

Midnight call

Selena's voice was low and her anxiety echoed down the line. I'd bombed out at eleven, and the phone had jolted me out of a dream.

I shivered into the receiver. 'Where are you?'

'I'm sorry it's so late. I'm in a telephone box, just across the road. I drove past and saw that your lights were out but I need to talk.'

Something had to be up with Johnny. I pulled on shorts and was wrestling with a windcheater when I opened the door. Selena was on the last flight of stairs. Her scuffs made a dry, scraping noise on the concrete, and she swung her arms across her body like a skater. She smiled at her breathlessness, but the smile fell quickly.

'Sorry, Gus,' she said, as I switched on the kettle.

Selena pulled out a chair and sat silently at the dining table, leafing distractedly through a library book in the muddle of the evening's study. I poured the coffee, knowing our drill. I was unable to stifle a yawn.

'Sorry,' she said again.

After clearing some space on the table I slouched in the chair opposite, thankful she'd been sitting away from an open exercise book filled with scrawled poems. Most were unfinished, written secretly for her.

'I'm pregnant, Gus. I need to know if you'd take me to have an abortion.'

She spoke evenly and pushed her hair back, exposing a rim of paler skin. Her eyes lifted, checking my reaction. I realised that I was holding in breath so let it out gently, through my nose, hoping not to confess shock. Selena released her hair to warm her hands on the coffee mug and it cascaded around her face.

'I've made the appointment, and there's no one else I feel I can ask.' She looked down, folding dog-ears in the library book.

'Does John ...?'

She nodded. Her nostrils flared in an effort not to cry. 'Johnny knows.'

In all the time that we'd been friends, Selena had never seemed so beautiful. I didn't want that, didn't want to leave myself so open. Especially now.

'You know how he is.' There was emotion in her voice, but no resentment or anger. We all made allowances for John, but Selena made too many. 'I've booked for Wednesday morning,' she said.

The arrangements were made and we listened as car doors slammed in the car park

below. Drunken voices argued about a key and eventually found their way into one of the ground floor units.

‘How’s uni?’ Selena asked. I grimaced, and we exchanged weary smiles. ‘I think,’ she said, ‘after that feeble attempt to change the subject, I’d better go.’

We hugged our goodbye, her hair soft against my stubble. Then she started down the stairs.

Later I remembered the businesslike set of her shoulders, the way she turned and called in a stage whisper: ‘Thanks, Gus.’

All the Johnnies

Inside, I flicked the light off and curled up on the couch, unable to think about sleep. An ambulance panicked its way along Roberts Road, and from the other direction I heard the last Fremantle train on its arc into the city.

Selena was right: I knew how he was. Maybe she thought she knew him too, better than anybody. But she was eighteen, and we were going on twenty-one and went back a long way. When Selena was still at school, Johnny and I were doing pubs and clubs, swigging scotch on the beach at Margaret River, hanging around with her brother Jim, Scotty McManus, Mick Mahon and the rest of the boys. We’d been through twelve years of school together, and for a while Johnny and I even lived around the corner from each other. As kids, we’d mucked around with bikes, yo-yos and frisbees, wearing the fuzz off tennis balls with made-up games. We talked football like veterans, and once saved all summer to go halves in a football, taking turns at keeping it overnight.

All through primary school John had been revered, even by older boys. He was wiry and athletic, and kids liked the way he served up cheek. To the teachers he was ‘Little Reilly’, brother of brainy Eamon and cousin of Declan, the school’s best long distance runner, so he always seemed to get away with more than the rest of us. In Year 4, someone heard that Johnny was having remedial help with spelling, but he was so popular that it was whispered around once and never mentioned again. He captained our footy team and we were unbeatable. I’d hear the cries of ‘Reilly! ... Rei-lly!’ as he swerved out of the centre, and later, when things changed, that was the John I liked to picture — all balance, pinpointing his target with a left boot.

Halfway through Year 7, Johnny was away from school for a few days because Eamon hung himself in their backyard. Brother Justin sat the class on a clovery slope above the playing fields, telling us how we all had a special responsibility to be John’s friend. A lone kookaburra perched on one of the goalposts and laughed while he droned on, the pained speech unnecessary because Johnny had *always* been our friend, and the whole sick drama only made him more of a hero.

Over at the senior school we discovered glorious possibilities for mimicry and pretence, and John became all the Johnnies of songs and teenage movies. Sometimes he was Johnny, the straight-out kid, other times he was the leader of our rebellion. In Year 9 we had a film club, and I remember the first so-called ‘premiere’, a revival called *Grease*

which most of us had seen on TV. John Travolta plays the guy called Danny, and all the girls say Dairr-ny, swooning as if he's god's gift. For a while, that was how we said John's name, like American girls in love. It was Jahhr-ny this and Jahhr-ny that, nasal and high-pitched. We talked about him with affection and concern in long phone conversations as he drifted to the margin and discovered the weed. We lowered our voices whenever parents walked by, defending him when they suggested he'd changed. Parents were parents, and didn't know shit. Johnny was a mate. We were immune to his insults, accepting of his moods. The year he dropped out of football, though, was the year we lost the Grand Final, and everyone reckoned the spirit had gone from our game. He dropped a lot of things after that, never in defeat but often with disdain.

John scraped into university and lasted two weeks, then deriding anyone still there. Meanwhile, he went missing in jobs which most of us had never even thought of. Once, it was quality control at a brewery, knocking bottles from the conveyor belt if they looked a bit suss, walking away with a carton at the end of a shift. We still chased waves and stayed in touch, but at night we saw less of him. He drank instead with people he met working or out by himself at clubs and was renowned for the company he attracted, blokes sometimes but mostly girls – moths to his desperate, luminous charm. We always envied him the girls, but never took the guys seriously, the same as the rumour about his spelling. Occasionally we'd meet up to see a band, and Johnny would introduce us to these strangers, people from schools that had always been our enemies. We took the piss out of them while they were up at the bar or having a leak, more comfortable in our circle.

'The guy's a prat,' we'd say to John.

Johnny never seemed to mind, gulping his beer like the rest of us, but the old cheekiness in his face had turned hard.

Selena had heard the story about Eamon and wasn't offended when I warned her about Johnny being wild, and about the way he discarded girls. Jim probably told her too, but she'd watched the famous Reilly mania from a distance and was intrigued. Selena and I both knew that my protectiveness was partly a cover for jealousy, but after she took up with John we grew even closer, confiding more often than we let others know.

Now I worried, about Selena, and about Johnny and me.

Beach, beer and pizza

Johnny rang next morning, wanting to go to the beach. I had lectures, and an African Lit tutorial which didn't finish until four, and expected his usual taunt.

'Okay, so I'm a loser for studying. What can I say, mate? I get off on it.'

But he wouldn't just leave it, and there was menace in his voice so I tried to placate him by suggesting a beer and a bite sometime after five.

He arrived about six with two girls I hadn't met, Gaynor and Leah. They were young — sixteen, maybe — and rode quietly in the front of the panel van as I stretched out in the back beside his wax-laden surfboard. The girls' presence unnerved me. Bringing them

along seemed callous, a deliberate insult to Selena, and I'd also hoped we could get around to talking.

'What you been up to, Johnny?' I asked.

He glanced at Gaynor and directed his answer at her. 'Not much. Went out last night, saw a band. Usual shit.'

We picked up two pizzas and then some cans from a drive-through, and continued west into Floreat along the jacaranda-lined Boulevard. Leah rummaged through a box of cassettes reeling off the names of albums, some approvingly, others with indifference. As well as pizza the van smelt of BO and maybe sex, and I wanted to get out. From West Coast Highway, John wheeled hard across oncoming traffic into the beach car park.

Under the faded slats of a picnic shelter, our voices joined the crash and hiss of the surf. The pizzas went quickly as the last of the March sun disappeared into deep blue. The girls drank cheerfully. Their eyes sparkled and they talked about casual jobs and secretarial college and their plans for a working holiday in England. Leah was skinny, hunching her bony shoulders in the cool. There was a shiver in her voice. Gaynor sat close to Johnny, and when she laughed she put her hand on his arm as if playing chords on a piano.

John was brooding. After a while, Gaynor and Leah walked over to the toilet block and we knocked back our beers in silence. He watched two middle-aged men under another shelter unpacking some kind of food basket. Finally, he bared his teeth in a snarling grin.

'How's the wife?'

He meant Selena. He used the term often, sending himself up I thought, though now I wasn't sure.

'You should know, mate. Pretty upset, I reckon.'

'Stupid bitch.'

'Mate, talk to her. Don't be such a wanker. She's just turned eighteen for Christ's sake. Shit, it's not like it's all her fault.'

'It's no big deal either. Not these days, anyhow. She freaks about nothing.' Johnny's empty can tapped the weather beaten table. The girls returned and he got up decisively.

'Who's coming in?' he demanded.

Gaynor looked nervously toward me.

'Bit bloody cold,' I said.

Johnny strode away and we followed, non-committal. The westerly had lifted. I felt like putting my arm around Leah to stop her shivering, but then I thought of what that might mean and couldn't bring myself to do it. Down on the sand, John pulled off his shirt and charged grimly into the break.

'Come on, Watson, yer piss-weak bastard,' he called over his shoulder.

He survived two dumping waves before surrendering, allowing himself to be swept into the shallows by the force of a third. The girls had worried at first but laughed as he lolled in the flux like a beached whale.

‘Crazy guy,’ murmured Gaynor.

We walked back up the beach and between the shelters, past the two men dining together. They had wine glasses, serviettes, the whole shebang.

‘Fags,’ John said softly, out of earshot, and the girls giggled.

In the car park the wind seemed to be swinging about, drifts and confused eddies patterning the bitumen with sand. Johnny pulled a rug from the back of the van, draped it around his shoulders and took me home.

Mr nice guy

I parked untidily, and we sat for a few moments in dread. The brighter sunlight of a day out of routine reminded me of simpler times, walking home when teachers had staff meetings, getting away from school for a recreation option. I turned to face her but Selena was staring at the dash, struggling to bring herself into focus.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’ll be all right, Gus. I will be all right.’

‘I’ll come in with you.’

But she shook her head, and a wave of unseemly relief washed over me. I lifted my hand and squeezed her shoulder. She opened the door and, with a forced smile, planted her Doc Martens outside the car. In another instant she was gone.

Waiting, I willed myself to be strong enough to keep thinking of Selena as a mate. I even wished she was my sister, instead of Jim’s, and forever distanced by blood. When I turned on the radio, songs of spirit and romance began to blot the edge of my resolve, so I retreated into silence.

Selena came back sooner than I had expected. She appeared groggy, and slid into the seat awkwardly.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked again, and her eyes acknowledged my denial of what had happened.

‘Let’s go,’ she said softly.

I drove back across the causeway, along the avenue between city and river, and she rested against the window as I rambled stupidly about our Catholic upbringing, never once mentioning Johnny. For her, the villain was misfortune.

She’d been staying at the little house Jim rented in Leederville, and when we arrived I helped her from the car, settling in the dim lounge-room. Selena was leaning forward, hands pressed together in the clamp of her knees. Out of the midday sun she looked wan, and I was troubled by the thought that neither of us might know if anything had gone wrong. She was thirsty, so I made tea, dwelling in the kitchen as sepia bled into the steaming water. Through the window, I saw a snail-ravaged cluster of bird’s nest ferns and, beyond them, a dove prospecting for seed on the tiny, unkempt lawn.

Soon she wanted to sleep, and I poured a bowl of muesli for my lunch, turning over pages of February's Rolling Stone on the kitchen bench. When I finished I washed the bowl and our mugs and a few other dishes, knowing they were Selena's, investing the chore with a value it never had at my own unit. Then I browsed through books in the lounge, reading bits and pieces from Jim's cricket biographies, relics from high school English, some racy new paperbacks and popular philosophy. The toilet flushed at three, so I took her a glass of water and sat with her while she swallowed two small white tablets. Dry-lipped and drowsy, she told me she'd be fine if I wanted to leave, but Jim was up at Lancelin for the week so I decided to wait, watching her gradually drift off again.

The next time she woke it was dark, and she sent me out for Chinese. We watched a sitcom re-run on TV, Selena picking through her fried rice without much interest. When I'd eaten my share of the food she pushed me her plate and I hoed into the leftovers. Later we talked, not directly about Johnny but about the idea of fate, and whether things happened for reasons. Soon words became difficult so I read to her, first from Jim's defaced high school poetry anthology and then a few pages from *The Prophet*, the bit where Gibran talks about sadness and happiness being part of the same thing, always coming together.

'That just about sums up John,' she said. 'Joy and sorrow, nice guy and absolute prick. That's Johnny, all right.' She eyed me ruefully, but let the subject drop. 'Could you stay here tonight, Gus? If you could ... I don't know, I'm actually feeling a bit fragile, I suppose.'

She looked at me tearily and I nodded.

'Maybe we should be together, Selena. Maybe we could go out. When you're better.'

I spoke timorously, and wondered whether she'd heard. On the bedside clock, a digital eight became a nine, and seemed poised to revert to zero.

'I like you too much,' she said at last.

I slept on the couch, waking late to the sound of Selena in the kitchen. She felt brighter, so I suggested going to the deli for bacon and eggs. When I got back, Johnny's van was parked where my car had been and I could hear his voice, filled with wild sarcasm. He looked at me and sneered.

'Here's Mr Nice Guy. You must be feeling pretty fucken good about yourself, Watson.'

I wondered how things looked to him, and what Selena had told him.

'G'day John.'

'Cosy little brunch, coming right up,' he said.

Still in her gown, Selena huddled at the kitchen bench, so near the telephone she seemed to be waiting for a call. She didn't speak, but I sensed that I should go. They needed to talk, and my presence only thickened the air. Suddenly guilty for my declaration the night before, I left them to the shifting sands of their own, private beach.

'Come on, Gus baby, let's get stuck into some of this tucker,' John called, as flywire swished behind me.

Doors and shutters

For a couple of months the old, fragile balance seemed restored. The three of us cultivated a silence about the abortion; Johnny and I drank together sometimes, mates, and he saw Selena when he felt like it. His moods turned like the tide.

Then, on a day of patchy June rain, Selena came to me bruised and resolute, burned out by the futility of compromise. I hadn't known that Johnny hit her, and it shocked me more than anything he had said or done before. She told me that I couldn't have known, but I thought I should have. I'd always known about his dad, the way Mr Reilly exploded when we were kids, and how Johnny thought that was part of what happened to Eamon. He'd fought a few times at school, but this was different. I kept thinking about it, and all the other things he'd done to Selena, with a sick, slow churning in my gut.

I took her out often after that and John avoided me, absent on nights with the mob and never calling around. When I confronted him at his flat, his eyes seemed to glaze over, impenetrable. He stood in the doorway and spoke through the mesh, dully, just holding the anger in. He told me he didn't know what I was talking about.

'Anyhow,' he said as I was going, 'why don't you mind your own fucken business for a change?'

As the door closed, like a shutter at high exposure, he was captured in a pose so uncharacteristic that I looked again, pointlessly, for he was gone. The image remained: Johnny, slumped against the wall of his cell, the shadows of his face Picasso-blue.

Selena and I edged toward new status. We started getting joint invitations to parties and dinners, and she embarrassed me with open displays of affection. One night in Fremantle, we drank fast to the exposed soul of Mississippi guitar, and shared a taxi which took us beyond the ritual of separation. At my door, careless with her voice, Selena challenged. 'Well anyway, let's go to bed.'

I turned the key, and we stumbled inside with the invading porch light. I kissed her lightly on the lips and closed the door. When I turned back to face her she collapsed into my arms, heavy with drink and exhaustion. We stood swaying, our heads blasted hollow by the night's music. Humming, she traced the contours of my buttocks with one flat hand. There was no urgency to our desire, and already I had a lazy sense of relief and fulfilment, like watching the credits at a movie.

Sitting on the end of the bed, I unbuttoned her shirt and rested my head on her shoulder, breathing into the base of her neck. Lips trod lightly on the rungs of a pulsing ladder stretching to her ear.

'Back in a minute,' she slurred.

Undressing slowly, I heard the flush of the toilet and the hollow clatter of an aerosol can. She seemed far away, in the void between our past as friends and my hopeless dreams. I found an unopened box of condoms at the back of a dishevelled drawer and was in bed when she emerged barefoot, shrugging off her shirt and unclipping her bra. Pale and lovely, she stepped unsteadily out of her jeans and I lifted the doona so that she could wriggle in beside me. We lay still and quiet as she regained her breath, and then she rolled

toward me. My fingers toyed with her nipples, still erect with the first chill of exposure. We kissed purposefully.

‘Selena?’

‘Hmm.’

‘Selena?’

‘Gus.’

‘Selena, I love you. I’ve always loved you.’

She drew away and looked at me intently.

‘Oh Gus.’ It was said regretfully, eyes averted. ‘What would I do without you? You’re my best friend.’ She began sobbing. ‘Gus, I love him. He’s such a bastard but I love him.’

I held her shoulders and whispered desperately into her bedraggled hair: ‘Selena, I loved him too.’

While she slept, I leaned on the balcony rail, aching with cold and loneliness, gazing beyond the shedding poplars and across a fluky sea.

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