

Purple Bruise

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Two belly-ache cries. Four blood-plastered fists, championing life in a sea-breeze filled ward. Two torn, sweat-drenched mothers, in drug-induced wonder, settling, side-by-side, in recovery.

Busty, short-haired nurse, arms the size of a wrestler, deftly changes and re-wraps Tamara and hands her back to the chocolate-skinned woman with midnight hair. Harmony folds her baby onto her breast, watching her daughter's lashes flutter as she suckles. The nurse washes her hands and moves across to freckly, blue-veined Susannah, who hands up her own squirming child. The nurse tuts and fusses over Zoe's fretful cries on the change table. Raises her eyebrows. "Oh, look here," she says, pointing to a tiny, faded purple bruise just above Zoe's buttocks. "She's got dermal melanocytosis!" As if she was giving out a prize.

"Same as Tamara," she adds, pleased with her discovery.

Blank expressions from both mothers. Nurse switches her gaze from one to the other, shrugs. "Lots of Aboriginal and Asian babies have got this little tell-tale mark."

She swaddles Zoe tightly and squeezes her before handing her back to her mother. "Wouldn't have picked it for you, little darlin'."

Susannah covers her disbelief with a polite laugh. Harmony just smiles and hugs Tamara tighter against her chest.

~

Zoe grows bird-like, light-skinned with flamingo thin legs and beaky, frantic energy. Tamara shoots up tall and broad over the years, slow-moving, not yet graceful. Under the share of their mothers' gaze, in the kitchens, backyards and footpaths of a small town, the two children widen the ellipse of their universe, spinning into a well-worn orbit that follows their mothers' own friendship. Zoe sparks and burns, choosing where they go and what they do under unfurling blue skies. Tamara's shadow stretches perpetually behind her leader. Zoe rounds up Tamara and her cousins outside Lee's General Store, everyone putting in a coin for the sweet and sour lollies, red frogs—and if they're rich enough that day, chips and gravy.

As they grow taller, the shadows on the pindan, under their feet, on the pavement, across the prickle-grass of their childhood, begin to fade. Eyes are avoided in the hallway and greetings diluted into one-word passings of politeness.

Yet... A tenuous spinning line of light remains between them, attracting and resisting, pulling and pushing the matrix of themselves, houses and streets and worlds falling further apart to bring them closer together.

Neither of the girls could have told you about the first blurring of that line—there was no distinct moment when the first *tightening* occurred: that soft purple haze where the sky kisses the sea, or where grey mangrove mud pushes and pulls, strains into, then becomes aquamarine saltwater sea. They could not tell you when that moment, that change-over, that occupation of someone else's memories, some-one else's mind, first occurred.

Zoe and Tamara. Tamara and Zoe. TamaraZoe. ZoeTamara.

~

“Now, I’m going to sound a bit blunt, but I want to be absolutely, unequivocally clear. What we do, what each and every one of us does, is find money.”

Dramatic pause.

“You laugh, but that is what we are doing. We don’t have a choice, that’s the job. Every one of us, from our top fundraisers to our smallest intern, like Zoe here—” *sudden raising of the head, the stomach drop of shame at being singled out*—“must all work towards that one goal. To find the money.”

Zoe sits with her legs crossed in a trim pencil skirt and a white blouse that almost looks see-through, but not quite. She wears fake gold earrings and a lanyard that reads “Zoe McDougal: Advancement Communications Officer.” She isn’t listening and doesn’t really care if anyone notices. Her boss’s voice drones on, his words hovering around her like lazy bush flies lingering hopefully on some near-dead carcass, the eyes of the staff drooping in noncommittal surrender, raised faces feigning interest but signalling defeat.

A familiar sensation of blurring begins. The line tightens. Her mind strains, pushes, pulls and—

Crack!

Frothy sulphur air. Dead fish. Salt-and-vinegar bite on lips. Wind lapping dry skin. Wet feet. Grainy white sand clinging to curled toes. *Dancing Queen* hums through Nan’s old phone. Fish-nibbled fingertips. A messy stomach rolls along with the rising tide.

TamaraZoe. ZoeTamara. Apart and together, the one of them, or perhaps the two of them, sit on a sagging milk crate. A line of taut, clear string feeds out from her hand and cuts into the brackish grey-turquoise water, an occasional soft tug from unreliable saltwater callers.

TamaraZoe groans, looks down at her belly, cokes-and-chips bloated. “I don’t feel any good,” she moans. Turns to Nan, who is bent over with heels planted in the sand, arms reeling in her third catch of the hour. The hapless creature flops in the frothy shallows, his fate decided.

“You ate too much of that shit, I told you!” calls Nan, her eyes set on the catfish.

Tamara lurches forward, bile rising—Zoe is pulled backwards too, the plastic seat biting into her thighs. The smell of mud and vomit and fish linger even as she returns to her body in the white-walled room. A few bored heads turn as Zoe rises, gives the boss an apologetic smile she hopes isn’t too fake, and makes her way to the door.

Outside, the cold day reveals a glinting sun through a patchwork of cloud—Perth’s pitiful attempt at winter. A black crow ruffles its feathers and two students hurry past, ignoring Zoe, deep in their own discussions.

Zoe covers her mouth with a shaking hand. She must have bitten her cheek. Swallowing the bile and blood, she stoops and drinks from a water fountain. The brief trip into Tamara’s world, though tasting like sick, was far better than the meeting she had to return to. Than the days and days of the same, the same, the same: stuck in traffic on the one-hour drive to work, seven hours of writing banal social media posts begging people to buy, buy, buy, and then getting stuck in traffic in the one-hour drive home.

The crow with moonlit eyes sings out to Zoe as she sighs and steps back through the glass doors.

~

Tamara closes her bathroom door behind her, pads out into the lounge-room. The smell of vegemite on toast drifts in from the kitchen. Drawn curtains keep out the sun, the lino cool and quiet under her feet. Hidden behind a dividing wall, she can hear Josh humming along tunelessly to a Paul Kelly ballad.

Tamara's piss had been hot and strong. The hand holding the Dip and Read stick with the two red strips emblazoned on it remains steady ahead of her. She doesn't look away, fearful that if she does, the two lines might disappear, that she might have imagined the whole thing.

A tear escapes. She brushes it away with one hand.

"Hey, Josh," she calls.

"Mm?"

"Come here," she says.

And in one moment, in one nth of a second, she feels the wild uplift of unexpected joy, the certainty of her decision. A part of her and a part of Josh lives *inside* of her.

Then—the blurring, the bending, the straining.

Crack!

Tamara feels Zoe's arrival, the heaviness overwhelming. Her knees buckle under the weight and she lowers herself onto the sunken suede couch in front of the TV.

She can't see Zoe's face, but she can feel her eyes upon her, within her. Hard, affronted. *This is bullshit. Twice in one week.* Tamara Zoe's eyes lock onto the white stick with the two red strips, precariously held, like an unexploded bomb.

Ohmygodohmygodohmygod—Zoe's thoughts come flying across empty space, her understanding, hard and frantic, imbued with a darkness Tamara cannot place.

"Shut up, shut up," Tamara whispers, begging the incoming onslaught of sightlines, emotions and particles of *otherness* to recede quickly.

"What's that?" says Josh. He walks into the room with toast in one hand and miraculously juggling two cups of tea in the other.

youcan'tbeamumwhataboutyourstudies—

Tamara Zoe's doubts and joy swirl and fizzle into a cacophony of silent struggle.

Tamara holds the pregnancy test stick out to Josh like rosary beads. He freezes mid-juggle. She can feel the smile tingling on the corners of her mouth.

You'llhavetodropoutdon'teventhinkaboutit—

"We're pregnant," Tamara says.

Yesyesyesitdoesmatteryouidiotdon'truinyourlife —

Tamara groans under the weight of Zoe Tamara Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe—

"We're having a..."

Crack!

Tamara is gone.

"Baby," Josh finishes the sentence for her. He manages to unload the toast and tea and drops down beside Zoe on the couch, arm around her. She pulls away from him, still shaking.

"That's... that's great, yeah?"

Zoe barely feels the foreign touch of the man sitting next to her. The world ripples in butterfly shades of dazzling green and blue. She feels her Tamara face, her Tamara body, her nose, and long legs. Each breath in is like purest cloud mist, each tightening of muscle a spasm of new delight. She stretches out the fingers of both hands and shivers when the joints follow her command. Her fingertips buzz with electricity, static, with the sense of being totally alive. *Total control.*

"Babe, are you okay?" Josh's voice echoes from a faraway place.

Zoe twists Tamara's body like she is balancing a hula-hoop—it feels strange, but easy enough—and turns to face Josh, looking at his anxious face, taking in the sun-bleached hair, his heavysset mouth, the confused smile. "No," she says, firmly, and commands the tears to run thick and fast now. They come quickly, like turning on a tap. "I don't want it. I don't want a baby."

A tsunami of rage reels up inside their body and breaks on the shore, eroding the particles of Zoe's grasp. Zoe Tamara Zoe Tamara Tamara Tamara—

Crack!

All goes dark.



Zoe wakes on the hardwood floor of her parents' lounge room, the peeling ceiling swims above her. She picks herself up and crawls weakly onto the couch. She feels the back of her skull where a small lump is already beginning to ache. A throbbing reminder of the fusion, the energy of TamaraZoe still burning within her.

Regaining her breath, she stands and walks carefully back along the hallway, a hand steadying herself on the wall, cautious that she might slip back into her old friend. *It's happened two times in one week... Why not a third?*

But there is one thing: a baby. A baby. Tamara is having a baby. And she's pleased about it! Zoe shakes her head. How can she not see this is not a good idea? How many times has she been inside Tamara's mind as she studied so hard, long hours in the night to achieve those grades... *She was bloody dux of our year, for Christ's sake.*

Her thoughts swarm and buzz like mosquitos wanting to escape from a jar.

She steadies herself.

Zoe slips back into the master bedroom quietly, hoping no one has spotted her absence, but the room is already so deadly quiet, apart from the shallow irregular breathing that rises like struggling smoke from the bed's centre, that everyone's eyes immediately bore into her when she enters.

"Where did you go?" Zoe's Aunty murmurs as her niece comes in.

Zoe shuffles past her sister Marley, who moves aside to let her get closer to their Mum.

Susannah McDougal lies in the middle of her bed, two palms crossed flat against her chest like she's already entombed, body stiff and wrapped tight in sheets that smell of lemon-scented detergent. Her strangled breath rattles in and out.

Susannah's lids are heavy with the thousand and one drugs being pumped through her bloodstream, only just keeping the pain at bay, but they flicker and refocus on her daughter's face. Even at the end, as her body gives way, she is determined to be present for her daughters.

"Hey Mum," Zoe whispers.

Zoe takes in the parched lips, the high cheekbones of the now skeletal face, auburn hair turned grey. Where is her beautiful mother? Where has she gone?

The mosquitos buzz.



Tamara sits behind the wheel of her open-roof Jimny, pulled up in the long grass on top of the red pindan cliffs. The quiet incoming roll of the waves below her are constant and calming. From here, she can just see the top of the stone women's raised heads. There are stories about those stones—old stories her Nan told her, how they had once been real women, sisters, running away from some lustful old man. They used their powers to turn themselves to stone. He would never have the pleasure of owning their bodies—even if death was the only answer. Each year, Nan said, the stone women stoop a little lower, their edges getting chipped away by tides and cyclones.

Unable to stop the ebb and flow of the seasons, but upholding their last act of defiance, the stone women hold their gaze on the young woman in that little pink Jimny.

When Tamara first bought the car—after years of saving and working at that awful bank where even her perfectly ironed white blouse with the official looking name tag didn't stop people from speaking to her differently than her kartiya colleagues—it had been her pride and joy. She felt like a Barbie doll in sunny California, driving around with nothing but sea salt and freedom flowing through her long black hair. No one could make her feel small in that Jimny.

But now, nothing is safe. It feels like her rib cage has been torn wide open and her insides could be plucked out at any moment.

Tamara picks up her phone and opens her messages to Zoe.

For these past two weeks, ever since *it* had happened, she has shut herself down, shut everyone down. Even Josh. She can't talk to him about the pregnancy, or what her final decision will be. She can't—not until she knows Zoe has taken her long dirty fingers out of her body for good. She is done with this mind-swapping shit.

Her mother's face appears suddenly from nowhere in her mind, an old memory, back when she was still good. Harmony is smiling out from under a colourful knitted blanket, putting on faces and making Tamara squeal with equal terror and delight. With a start, Tamara realises Zoe is there too in this memory, just as she remembers her: small and big at the same time, curled up beside her under the soft covers, each girl's laughter driving the other further into hysterics, goaded on by Harmony's strange facial contortions and wriggling fingers.

A different time, Tamara thinks.

She types into the phone. "Get your skinny arse up here asap."

Minutes pass and Tamara's phone *pings*. She jumps, lost in her thoughts. A message pops up: "Booked my flight. Arrive Saturday morning. See you soon."

~

"Picking up some stuff at Lee's soon. Meet you there?"

Twenty minutes have passed since Zoe sent that text. She wanders down the aisle, delaying the inevitable exit into the humid air outside. She picks out some condiments—pickled mangoes and a packet of tamarind paste. They were Mum's favourites. She'll take them back home for Marley, if not to taste, just to remember.

Finally, plastic bag in hand, she steps outside. As the hot wind rolls across the melting bitumen and into Zoe's face, a familiar pink Jimny rumbles into the carpark. Too fast. An uneven park over the white lines. Heavy legs jump out, the car door left open behind her.

Here we go, Zoe thinks.

"Oi, you!" Tamara calls out.

Zoe senses the danger, and freezes like a kangaroo in headlights, not sure which way to jump. An old man nearby nursing hot fish and chips sidesteps the curb and makes it his business to walk the other way.

Tamara steps towards Zoe, fast but not rushed—one, two, three steps, then slings a fist straight into Zoe's left jaw.

Crack!

Her fist hits cheek and bone. Zoe yowls in pain, staggering away from Tamara. A ricochet of glass breaking against bitumen—pickled mango stains yellow on black tarmac.

Sensing the commotion rather than hearing it, Mrs Lee hobbles out through the sliding doors. Her bad leg almost makes her lose her balance, but she hasn't lost any of her fight.

"Go on you mob, take your shit somewhere else!" She pauses to see if the two young women are paying any attention to her. They are not. Then she recognises them. Pulls up. Indignant.

"You two? What are you two fighting for? Think your mothers would like to see you like this?" No answer. Stubborn eyes burn holes into the other.

Mrs Lee doesn't have time for this, there are boxes to be stacked. She's seen it all before. She limps back inside and Tamara is left towering over the crumpled Zoe. They're alone now.

"Are you listening?" Louder. "*Are you listening to me?*"

Zoe shakes her head in bewilderment.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Tamara is just getting started, gathering her fury like the storm clouds breaking across the bay. “You think I don’t know what’s best for me, for my own life? I’m my own *fucking* person, and if I want a baby—I’m gonna have a *fucking* baby!”

“But Tamara—” Zoe gasps, and she waits for Tamara to break her pause with more angry violence. There is nothing. *Explain yourself then.* A flopping, choking fish.

“You don’t understand,” Zoe tries. “Everything’s been fucked since... And you’ve got it all... sorted. It’s all bloody perfect for you up here,” and here her voice lowers with jealousy—“with your grades and your boyfriend and, and your house. I just wanted... I want to have what you have.”

Tamara raises an eyebrow in disbelief. No words are necessary between them as the line that connects the two swells with stardust and righteous rage, pulling them closer together, promising collision.

Oh, everything’s fucked for you?

A deadweight, dark shift behind Tamara’s eyes and now she speaks with her mouth and not her mind—

“You listen to me now, Zoe. Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. My. Head.”

Zoe nurses the imprint of Tamara’s fist on her jaw and gawps helplessly at the woman boiling and bubbling in front of her, her blank face gazing stupidly into Tamara’s fury. That’s the final straw—Tamara lurches forward and grabs Zoe’s shoulder-length hair. “*Let me live my own*”—curls the hair in her first, yanks it down—“*damn*”—Zoe’s whole body follows—“*life!*”

Zoe screaming and screaming. “*Tamara! For fuck’s sake, stop!*”

Crack!

Fingernails on forearms. Elbow in ribs. A misplaced hand pushes hard against a tit. *ZoeTamaraTamaraZoe.* Rage, pain, grief, confusion, fear, guilt, love. Love for each other, for the unborn baby, the yearning for their mothers. It swirls around them, until the two bodies jostling against each other in the parking lot became one blurred figure, bent double and inwards over and through one another, their faces warped into a single open scream—

Tamara feels Zoe’s flesh pressing against her, feels her pain trying to latch its claws into her.

No, not again. She stills herself, finds the vast empty space inside the storm. From the corner of her vision, like trying to catch reflections through disturbed water, she senses line upon line of old people behind and beside her. Their presence emboldens her. She is not alone.

With a mighty *Crack!* Tamara pushes all her weight into Zoe, and releases herself at the same time—allowing all of herself to cascade into the other, to become more heavy than the emotions Zoe holds, to allow not a pocket of air to survive in the sluggish, swirling mass they exist in at this moment. With nowhere to go, Zoe’s cries swell and crash open, and the dead-eye memories come flooding in—

Zoe visceral in her taunting—You can’t play with us anymore You’re not fast enough I’m not being mean I’m just telling you the truth It’s just a joke What are you crying for Go sook to your Nan—one hard, quick, fast punch to Tamara’s soft gut while the adults aren’t looking—Tamara opening home’s door and the fear of what waits inside stops her, the lights are all off and something burning creeps from the kitchen The figure of a man she does not know outside her mother’s room makes her softly close the door and she spends the moonlit hours seeing the streets a different way How long has she been like this?—Nan screaming at Tamara’s mum, What did you do this time? and Tamara had to go—Harmony didn’t like it but it wasn’t up to Harmony anymore, that’s what Nan said, it wasn’t safe—Taller now, Zoe asking What’s wrong with your mum? And the smile at her lips and the joke in her eyes made Tamara blush and hate Zoe at the same time—And so fresh it stung, the memory of Susannah, sweet second mum Susannah, dead on her back, her skin that pallid green to remind you something’s

not quite right under her pretty polka-dot dress and rouged cheeks—Then back years again, Tamara all quiet and small the day after Harmony’s funeral—Where were you? she cries, Why didn’t you come? Shaking hands holding a photo of her mum all crumpled and wet, the emulsified upside-down smile, from a happy, long-ago time Before the red scratched arms and yellowed teeth, before the poison, the self-inflicted death Harmony’s frozen eyes wordlessly follow Zoe’s silent steps as she turns away from Tamara, silent and cold—The figures, the endless black figures, the unbroken line of people around Tamara, not from her past, but from now, swarming around them and suffocating Zoe, pressing their accusing fingers over her open mouth, demanding that she listen—

Crack!

A trickle of blood runs down Tamara’s arm where fingernails cut deep. Silent tears flow. Both breathing hard.

Finally, Tamara finds the first words: “I’m sorry about your Mum. Nan told me.”

Zoe attempts to take a few steps forward, but her knees give way, and she drops to sit on the curb. She lowers her head into her hands. There are no words to talk about her mother. The unfinished goodbye, the rain falling, the waiting and the hollow space in her chest. The orderlies lifting her body onto the trolley. The empty, empty bed.

Instead, the slow realisation of everything Tamara has experienced begins to sink like rocks in Zoe’s stomach. She trembles, falters. The dark shadows, their presence around them even now, watching, forces her to remain still, though she feels like running. She wishes she hadn’t seen what she saw.

“I’m sorry,” Zoe whispers. “I didn’t know... I didn’t know what it was like.” She can barely get it out. “What you went through with Harmony.”

Tamara exhales slowly, the gale inside her subsiding but not entirely stilled. From the periphery, she feels familiar eyes watching them. Harmony, looking like when she was still herself, her familiar frangipani perfume floating over them. Despite the bubbling anger beneath it all, her mother’s gentle arrival makes Tamara smile. They both look down at the pathetic figure crying on the curb, tamarind pulp oozing out of the package onto Zoe’s scuffed shoes.

They are separate now, but something dark still lingers. The inexplicable twine of connection interwoven between them. *Perhaps that’s why Zoe’s really crying*, Tamara thinks. She knows they can both feel it. After everything, she had hoped somehow, this link would be destroyed... But still, there it is, persistent. Threatening. Concealed and secretive.

Tamara sits down beside the girl who had been her first friend. Zoe’s heart lifts at the good firm press of Tamara’s body by her side. But the heavy silence and the strange otherworldly presence of strangers amongst them keeps Zoe from speaking up. Something is yet to be said.

“You can feel it too, can’t you?” Tamara begins. “This thing between us. It’s not going away. Maybe it never will.”

Zoe raises her stained face to look out across the car park. Red-streaked land cruisers back in and out of Lee’s Store carpark like the tide. A gaggle of kids looking like they’re up to no good walk up the rubbish-lined verge with Kendrick’s foul-mouthed poetry preaching from a shiny new iPhone. She knows what Tamara says is true.

“You should know that everything I have, all these things you want so much: I had to fight for it. Nothing came easy. I raised myself while watching my mum *kill herself* with her demons. And when Nan took me in, I made sure I worked every day to look after her the way she looked after me. I need you to know that because...” Sideways, burning eyes. Daring Zoe to have the courage to look at her. “Because if you ever dare to control me like that again, I will never let you forget it. You think you can just have me and leave me? Move me and make me do shit whenever you want to? You might have me, but I’ve got you too.” And she spits venom, a snake wrapping herself around the final gasps of its trembling prey: “I’ve got you too, and I promise you this: *I’ll live inside your bones until the day I die*. I’ll haunt you every

second of every day until you can't breathe 'cept to say my name—*Tamara Tamara Tamara*. I'll show myself to you whenever I please, I know I can do it now. And you will see me. You will feel me, and everyone who comes with me." The dark, unknown figures in Tamara's circle stand tall and omniscient, never far from Zoe's mind. "And I will burn you so brightly with everything I've been through, all our trauma, and all our strength—you won't even be Zoe anymore. You'll just be a shadow thing, a false thing, a mask for the true thoughts that remain, which will just be me, me, me, swirling around in your head, forcing you to listen to my screams. And you will hear me scream, Zoe. I promise you that."

The sharp, aching bruise on Zoe's jaw turns a violent shade of purple, circling yellow. It demands attention, but for now, she doesn't dare make a sound.

"So... what's it gonna be?"