

Renee Hanrahan

The Elephant in the Room

The grey stench filled the room. You could smell it over the potatoes, the peas and even the roast beef. Aunty Lisa had dragged it in with her when Mum picked her up from the airport. She squeezed it through the front door and hauled it inside. Dad didn't make a joke about how heavy her carry-on must have been or the fact that she didn't bring her boyfriend with her. His lips stayed shut in a pitiful smile.

I thought it would be happier, more circus-like, splashing water around and flailing its trunk. But instead it just sat in the corner on all fours watching us eat. Mum had spread a Sunday roast down the dining room table. The golden rims of our fancy crockery looked tacky. I was usually in awe of their royalty but this visit was different. Aunty Lisa didn't seem very grateful. She kept her head down and didn't look me in the eye when I asked if she had bought any more necklaces for the dress up box to wear when we come up in the summer. She just shook her head. Mum said "Summers a long way away. We're not sure if we'll go up yet". What was she talking about? We went up every year.

The whole night everyone had been dancing around Aunty Lisa like she was an ajar bedroom door at 2AM. She usually filled up the room with her laugh but tonight it was dark and quiet. Tom kicked me under the table and looked at me the way he does when I talk too much during his favourite TV shows. The table stayed silent. I picked at my beef. The elephant snorted.

Necklaces were our thing. Aunty Lisa buys sparkling dangly ones that go down to my belly button. We search second-hand stores for hours looking for additions to our dress-up box collection. She was always wearing one. Always. I loved how they glistened even in the dullest light. She wore bright green pendants and copper chains with a glowing yellow bead that looked like a sunflower in a mundane garden patch. I reminded myself of their beauty and looked up to see her daily jewels but no shimmer bounced off her neck. Only the grey V-neck of her dirty t-shirt hung off her chest. She wasn't Aunty Lisa without a necklace. My brain was still churning through reasons of why she wasn't wearing one when I saw them. I wasn't hungry anymore. The elephant shifted its hoof and the floorboards below creaked.

The blues and purples reminded me of berries pummeled into her neck. I hope that's not what's for dessert. The stains curled around her neck up to her vacant earlobes. They weren't the type of bruises you get from bullrush. They were small and deep. They looked more like the type that show up after you've been lying on a stone on Okarito beach, niggling you in the back under your towel. The type of bruises that have been working their way into your flesh for a long time but you don't realise until you stand up. You don't realise how bad things really are until you stand up and get out. My throat felt tight as I tried to swallow my peas. The elephant flapped its ears but no one looked up.

The smudges of blackberries, boysenberries and plums crowded her neck. They layered over each other like a trifle. I felt sick. I wanted to vomit. Instead words spewed out of my mouth. I didn't mean to say it but the syllables shoved past my lips and fell out onto my plate. "Aunty Lisa, how did you get those bruises?" The elephant stood up tall on its back legs and screeched. Its trunk hit the roof. My ears were ringing. Everyone looked up. Dad's fork rattled on his plate. His hand was shaking. Aunty Lisa started crying and mumbling an apology. It was like opening a old bottle of soda after you drop it on the floor. I looked over to the corner but the elephant was gone.

There was not another sound of the elephant snorting or creaking. Nor was there a sight of it shifting or flapping its ears. The room felt light, as if the weight of the elephant was no longer holding us down. Above Tom's head like a painting in the perfect square of the window frame, the elephant was trudging out of the garden, squeezing through the gate. The grey aura of the elephant had left the room.