



## Broken letterboxes mended by the light of a pale moon

Nicholas Antoniak

Your sister tried to call today. Twice. You didn't notice, you were like that. Distracted. Your mind always wandering, refusing to come to rest, instead glossing over everything as a whole, equating commitment with missing out. A wine glass gripped in your right hand, fists clenched in the left, you stared out onto the street. You were quiet. Across the road, a television flickered, casting shadows onto the street that were quickly consumed by the night. Angela, standing there, you were a portrait. Of indecision, anxiety and beauty. Pure and cold.

When you were younger you played the saxophone. Fingers dancing from key to key, alternating between notes with veracity and an unbridled passion. Your mother had told you that one day you would be great. Announced it loudly to her friends at one of the gatherings your father loved to throw. You had taken the praise, naively, at face value, shifting your feet self-consciously over the patterned, frayed carpet. The Adelaide orchestra had taken you in the very next year. At seventeen, you were its youngest ever member. Over time, however, it became apparent that the music you played evoked no more pride for your mother than the standing it gave her among her peers. Maybe that's why you gave it up, maybe you didn't need a reason. But eventually, as with most things in your life, your music got buried out in the yard. Down by an

innate desire to do good, and the belief that one day everything would turn out alright.

You settled into the night with a tired resignation. Two pieces of toast, plain, a mug of tea, also plain, and that novel you never seemed able to finish. Body splayed in the armchair, you longed just to slip into sleep. Your body, however, had other plans, twisting your insides, skewering your thoughts and rendering your eyes restless yet still. Not even the rabid colours from the television screen could save you, the images entering and leaving your psyche like empty promises, unhelpful and largely misunderstood. When distractions fail to distract, we are often left only with ourselves. Face to face, alone in the dark. At times like this, it felt as if the universe existed for nothing more but to jest. In the corner, your phone lit up for the third time that night. You didn't notice. You were like that.

A packet of Marlboro Golds sat on the table, half-empty. A smoker by choice, not by need, you wouldn't call yourself addicted or compulsive or in need of help. It was just something you chose to do. Despite the countless warnings of death in bold writing and in even bolder pictures, the action was undeniably poetic. The complicit inhaling of toxic, harsh smoke. To deny the urge for longevity in lieu of small, momentary pleasures. You ran the lighter along the cigarettes end, transforming the tobacco into hundreds of tiny glowing embers. Your mother would've hated seeing you smoke, though there was a lot she didn't like. Gripping the filter between your finger and thumb, you brought it to your lips. Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out.

In Year 9 you were locked in a cleaning supplies closet solely because a senior hadn't liked the way your face looked. They left you in there, trapped, for two hours. You had

returned home in tears, your mother shouting at you for making too much noise. She was drinking and watching *The Price is Right*. It was midday. Going out the exact same way you came in, you made your way to the local soccer field and surrendered yourself to the grass. You always had felt safer in the open. There, the feelings of confinement could be eluded, at least momentarily, by the magnitude of space above and around you. You never did feel completely free though, not even there. Not in the true sense of the word, at least. Not in the current state of the world and what was happening around you, continuously and without fault.

You thought about calling her today, your mother. The idea had pushed itself past your regular line of thought and embedded itself into the cracks of your mind. It seemed the right thing to do in the moment, it always did. But time and time again proved that it wasn't. It never was. Even if it felt it at the time.

*'You hate me don't you?'*

*'Mum ... It's not like that.'*

*'Well it seems like that. You don't call, you don't write. How are we supposed to know you're ok? You have to forgive us at some point Angie.'*

*'Mum, you're not listening to me.'*

*'You know maybe if you were a bit more like Timothy from ...'*

*'Mum.'*

*'He just got accepted into a major law firm in the city ...'*

*'Mum.'*

*'His parents are always talking about him ...'*

*'Would you just shut up.'*

*'What?'*

*'Would you please, for once, just shut up, just once in your life can you be quiet and listen to someone other than yourself. Forgive*

*you? Forgive you? Do you remember my 11th birthday? You remember what you got me? A fucking cosmetic kit, you joked with your friends about how ugly I was. I was standing in the next room.'*

*'It was a joke Angie, I'm sorry.'*

*'A joke? I was six, Mum, six! You know how that felt, waking up to that? Hearing that from the person you look up to, the person you admire, on your birthday. I was six.'*

*'Well, I didn't know it upset you that much.'*

*'But you should've Mum. You should've.'*

*Click.*

\* \* \*

The last time you saw her was on a June evening. It was cold and brisk. You wore a green fleece jumper she had gotten you last Christmas, she wore a plain black t-shirt. Your mother never really did feel the cold, even as she aged. She had come to you. Made the journey from her home town in Melbourne, to, in her words, make sure everything was okay. At that point you were barely speaking. Maybe an occasional phone call, once or twice a year, brief and never overly personal. You told yourself had both been busy. Doing other things. Spending time with other people. It wasn't either of your faults, you were just drifting apart, as people often do.

*'We should go for a walk.'*

*'Where?'*

*'To the lookout. It's just down the road.'*

*'I'm tired Mum, can we do it tomorrow?'*

*'Come on Angie, it'll be good for you, you'll feel better, I promise.'*

The path in question could be found by the end of the road, near a small clearing of trees and next to a cluster of blackberry bushes.

*'Do you come out here a lot?'*

*'I don't really get the chance.'*

*'It's beautiful.'*

It was dusk and the headlamp wrapped tightly around your forehead pressed into your skin. It hurt a little, but almost in a good way, as if it was the only thing at that point in time capable of holding you together.

*'I miss you Angie. We all miss you.'*

You had stepped over a fallen tree in the centre of the path. It had split down the middle and now lay, in pieces, in the dirt.

*'I know, Mum. I know.'*

Pain and loss can be understood. Approached logically with the best intentions, however, it still hurts. No matter if you believe what you're doing to be true, or right, it still hurts. Every single time.

*'All the stuff that happened Angie. I didn't do it because I'm evil, or I wanted to hurt you. I'm human, Angie. You've got to understand that. I make mistakes. Yeah, pretty bad mistakes and a lot of them but I do my best. I'm not perfect, I'm never going to be perfect. Can you forgive me for that Angie? Can you?'*

You stood at the forefront of the outlook. Now dark, East Brighton had lit up, and you could see it all. Shopping centres, movie theatres, convenience stores, houses, museums, office buildings and people. Thousands and thousands of tiny little people. Eating and working, loving and fighting, all contained in their quiet little worlds. Sometimes you longed to be one of them. Any of them. To still be able to get caught up in Monday night reality television. Able to get mad over your favourite sports team losing. Able to feel. Able to love. But you couldn't, because, you were you and in a way, that's all you had. Yourself. As twisted and messed up as you were, you were all you had. All you knew. All that you'd ever know.

*'Mum, I don't know.'*

*'You don't know what?'*

*'I don't know if I can forgive you, Mum, I'm sorry.'*

*'Will you try Angie? Can you promise me that you'll at least try?'*

There is an anxiety in some that manifests itself as a type of emptiness. An emptiness that remains unaffected by company, passion or belief. It is a hollow feeling that follows one around. It is the sharp pang that arises three glasses of wine into your fourth consecutive half-hour of daytime television and it's two and you're drunk already and you know you should get up and turn off the TV and sort your life out so you can finally become someone great. But you don't. You never do, because it's the kind of feeling that stops you from being alive and then punishes you for it. The kind of feeling that makes no sense. It's lonely and alienating and hurtful and it's yours. For weeks, for months, for years and for lives.

You just sat there in bed, staring at the wall. Your house felt lonely when the lights were off. Empty and big. Like a fish tank without fish or a rollercoaster without any passengers. You thought about where you used to live. The yelling, the fights, the tears, the anger and the neglect. Then you thought about the way your mum smiled when she saw her friends, the barbeques you used to have in summer, and the time she cried when she dropped you off on your first day at school. She cried, because she was going to miss you. For the first time that week, you picked up your phone from the corner of the room. Swipe — click — contacts — mum — call.

Ring ring. Ring ring. Ring ring.

*'Hello? ... Hello? ... Who is this?'*

*'Mum ... It's Angie ... I'm just calling to say ... I'm just calling to say that I'm sorry, and I miss you.'*