

LIZ JOHNSTON

MAGGIE AND MARDI

When I came to, everything had stilled. The red dunes and the small, dry bushes of the Outback that had been whipping past the window were now fixed in place. My hair, untouched by velocity, lay calmly at my shoulders. Sweeping back the loose strands that had fallen over my face, I took in the destruction around me.

Broken glass peppered the dashboard and seat, and there was blood everywhere. A halfmoon of windshield remained in place on my side of the car, fractured in jags like the veins in a leaf. It bent outwards closer to the middle and then sprayed out over the hood around Mardi.

She was caught half over the steering wheel and half through the broken windshield. Every inch of her was covered in blood; a terrifying amount spread out around her on the hood of the jeep. Glittering shards of glass floated in the growing pool like boats in a great lake.

“Mardi?” I whimpered at the lifeless form of her. The jeep replied with a slow, quiet hiss and a sick ticking noise.

I struggled with the buckle, panic mounting as the belt—the belt that had saved my life—refused to give to my frantic jerks. My stomach hardened. I felt a rush to my tightening throat and leaned forward to vomit on the jeep’s floor. The belt dug deep into my shoulder as I heaved, but the initial purge let me to come back to the task less desperately. With steadier fingers, I plied the buckle, and the belt responded, smoothly setting me free as if it hadn’t just been pinning me to the seat. I grabbed the handle and shoved the door with my shoulder, tumbling out of the jeep and dropping the five or six feet onto the baking sand.

Mardi had worked for months to convince me to go to Australia with her. She liked travelling with me, liked hanging out with me, because people saw us as hotter together. Since our first class together in freshman year, everyone thought of us as twins. Maggie and Mardi, each of us attractive in our own right, became irresistible together, with blond hair, blue eyes, perky breasts, and melodic laugh doubled. So when she bugged me about Australia and the trip, it wasn’t my company she wanted so much as that hot twin status: coveted by all, granted access anywhere.

The first few times she mentioned it, I agreed in theory, giving her an idle “Definitely.” But later in the semester, when she started looking into flights and talking about dates, I gave excuses. It wasn’t the best timing. As students, we’d have to wait until summer to take such a long trip, and I had to start saving up, researching MBA programs, looking for a part-time job.

The truth was, I didn’t want the kind of attention she and I could attract together. By the time she really started putting the pressure on, Danny and I had been dating for two and a half months. I didn’t want to leave him for the three weeks she hoped to spend Down Under. I certainly didn’t want to do the kind of sexy single tour I was sure she had in mind.

“Why Australia?” I asked her at a *Grey’s Anatomy* season finale party over at Janet Lee’s.

“Koala bears. Coral reefs. . . . Sexy accents.” We were in the kitchen, fixing another round of bellinis, and I shook my head as she dumped mix over the ice in the blender.

“Come on, Mardi. Don’t tell me you want to go all the way to Australia to pick up guys.”

She narrowed her eyes on me before flicking on the blender. The roar of the splintering ice drowned out the commercials and chatter coming from the living room. She held

her glare until the blender settled into a regular slushy sloshing noise. When she flicked it off, she lowered her voice.

“Look, not everyone’s all happily coupled off like you and Danny. Maybe I do kind of hope to meet someone while I’m travelling. But that’s not why I’m going. Obviously. It’s Australia. I want to see the animals, enjoy the climate, surf, explore. I thought you did, too.”

I met her eyes. They looked so much like a reflection of my own. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to go to Australia, not during our summer, not when I was falling in love and beginning to plan my future. But I also didn’t want to flake out on someone who considered me her best friend.

In the end, I went out of guilt. Guilt for being happier than she was. While Danny and I had been getting more and more serious, Mardi had remained steadily single. I’d spend Friday nights curled up with my boyfriend in front of a movie, and she’d go out to clubs and sleep with guys who never called. Lately, I hadn’t even been there as a sympathetic ear. Where we’d once been in constant contact, dinner and drinks and phone calls and workouts on a regular basis, we now saw one another only by accident, bumping into each other around campus or at gatherings of mutual friends. We’d grown apart, me moving forward with visions of a life after college while she was pinned in place. I felt I owed her something big to compensate for it.

For a time I lay on my back where I’d landed, my body still as my mind raced. The noon-time sun shone through my closed eyelids, turning them into a blood red screen on which I kept replaying the awful scene inside the vehicle.

We’d laughed the first time we saw the warning signs, a yellow diamond with the black silhouette of a kangaroo mid-bound. Growing up in northern Ontario, I knew the hazards wildlife could pose on the roads.

People crashed into moose all the time, and I was used to the signs that warned of their presence. But moose were huge. They could match the size of an SUV or suburban, double a small car. They were deadly because they were massive. When I thought of kangaroos, on the other hand, I couldn’t help but dress them in boxing shorts and gloves. They were ridiculous, and not half the size of the animals that threatened cars on the highways back home, I thought.

The first kangaroo we saw was larger than a man. And I hadn’t considered how fast they were.

We’d seen it our first day on the road. It zipped along the side of the highway, keeping pace with the jeep we’d rented. It was incredible, the way its huge thighs propelled it forward. It didn’t waste a second, its feet swinging back and forth rapidly to launch and relaunch from the earth. There was no lag between jumps, just fluid, efficient motion, like a train. Unstoppable.

I couldn’t believe our luck when we saw another one the next day, rushing our way. It was anything but ridiculous, a magnificent, powerful creature. This time, I went to dig my iPhone from my purse to film it, already picturing sharing it with Danny when I got home and uploading it to Facebook after our premier viewing. I’d said, “Another kangaroo!” before lowering my head. Didn’t Mardi see it with me? She hadn’t slowed. When I looked up from my purse, phone in hand, the animal had veered off its course and was pounding toward the highway. I screamed Mardi’s name. She moved so much slower than everything else, turning her head toward the kamikaze kangaroo only as it leapt in front of the jeep.

At last I rolled to my side and pushed myself up off the sand. I wiped my hand against my shorts and shuddered with a shock of pain. My hands were bloody from where I’d crushed my phone against the dashboard in the crash. Tiny slivers of glass shrapnel were wedged into my palm.

I would have to go back in there, into the jeep, to find the smashed phone and see if I could still use it to call for help. We hadn't seen another vehicle all day. I'd asked the man at the motel to point us to roads less travelled, and this morning the empty road had seemed a luxury. We could drive as fast as we wanted, treat the Outback as our own personal autobahn. We could squat and pee roadside without passersby to see us. We could roll down the windows and belt out the most obnoxious, guilty-pleasure pop songs we felt like singing along to without the frowns and judgment of other drivers. We could breathe for a while away from the expectations and noise and pressure of other people. We didn't have to share the views or the road. And we could put real distance between ourselves and the type of men who had corrupted the first half of our trip.

Now, the abandoned highway struck me with panic. I couldn't rely on anyone passing by to see the wreck and call for help. No one, not one single car had gone by. The Outback was virtually silent, barring occasional clunks and hisses issuing from the devastated jeep. If anyone was going to rescue me, I'd have to call them myself.

I steadied myself, my eyes on my feet as I gathered the nerve to look back into the cab. The stench of sun-baked vomit hit me hard as I stood in the open door. My empty stomach surged again, but I managed to hold it back. I lifted my head to scan the floor of the jeep for my phone. It lay just at the edge of the puddle of puke, the screen smashed and lifted completely from the body of the phone, bulging up like a botulistic tin of sardines. I dragged it over to myself and carefully pressed the relatively intact power button, hoping for a miracle.

When nothing happened, I felt myself begin to wail. The desolate vacuum of the landscape absorbed my cries, making nothing of my mounting fear and anguish. This slice of the world was empty even of echoes. I snatched up the phone and hurled it out over the jeep with a tearing scream. Then, slowly, I turned my back to the jeep and sank

back down onto the ground, feeling a chill as I hit the hot sand.

Our trip hadn't started off as some wild expedition down rarely travelled highways. When we first got to Sydney, Mardi had us doing exactly what I'd expected and exactly what I'd objected to. We spent the days sunbathing, Mardi flirting with tanned, blond gym bodies. At night, every night, we went out to clubs where Mardi would drink too much and wind up making out with strangers while I tried to keep them at bay. I spent a string of nights on random couches, the judgmental third wheel who dampened the evening without actually preventing guys from slipping off my friend's panties.

Predictably, these drink-fueled nights led not to meaningful romance, but to mornings after filled with self-loathing and regret. And I wasn't immune. I'd fended off a barrage of attacks from friends of the men Mardi was hooking up with, valiantly faithful to Danny until our sixth night there. That night, fed up with playing the wet-rag wingman or negligent babysitter, I accepted too many drinks. Suddenly, I was on the dance floor, grinding up against a man I didn't remember exchanging a single word with. My body thrumming with bass, I leaned back into him, not resisting as he slid his hand down the front of my pants.

The rest of the night was a blackout, but thankfully I woke up, once again, alone on a couch. A hangover, among the worst I'd experienced, held me hostage there. I felt like I was riding a small skiff through a roiling sea. Lying motionless for hours, I waited for Mardi. At last, she emerged from the bedroom with a hulking, handsome man wearing only his boxers. They whispered for a moment. I heard Mardi say my name, and then they stepped softly through the living room to the kitchen. While she stopped at the breakfast bar and grabbed a pen and notepad there, the man poured two glasses of water, set one in front of her, and brought the other to me.

“Someone drank too much.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the glass. His smug, condescending smile filled me with quiet anger. I held the water in my mouth, imagining my desiccated tongue rehydrating like a soup mix onion.

“I’d love to have you girls stay for brunch, but I’ve got to meet a friend in”—he looked up at the clock behind me—“wow, in an hour.”

“Here,” Mardi said, pulling off the sheet she’d been writing on. “This is the name of the hostel we’re staying at.” She held it out to him. “We can’t really use a cellphone here, but I wrote down my email address. Not the most efficient way to make plans, but...”

He wandered over, snatched the note, and grabbed her ass to pull her in against him. “I’ll definitely be dropping you a line.” While he leaned in and kissed her, I looked off towards the front door.

“Maybe we could plan to meet somewhere. That might be smarter. Is there a good pub we could grab dinner at?” I felt her glance my way. “Either in a group, or, I’m sure Maggie won’t mind if I leave her alone for a few hours.”

I looked back, about to agree that she could ditch me whenever she wanted, but the man gave a little frown and spoke first.

“Tonight’s not great for me. Why don’t you let me email you? We’ll work something out.”

An hour later, Mardi and I were sitting at a Starbucks a few blocks from our hostel.

Halfway around the world, there was something comforting to be able to sit in the completely unforeign café. It was another gorgeous day, but neither of us wanted to go to the beach. Neither of us wanted to be here at all. While I sipped a glass of water and nibbled at a dry scone, hoping to appease the hangover, all I could think about was what I’d done on the dance floor. My regret had a physical heft to it; it weighed down on my chest, my heart, like a medicine ball.

For a long time, neither of us spoke. We gazed past each other, through the café’s windows, pressed in by our separate thoughts. Mine ran a circle, continually tripping back to the moment I’d agreed to join Mardi, the shallow party-girl, on an expedition half-way across the world. How I’d come to that moment, how my resistance had given way, eluded me now. But here I was. At last, she pushed her coffee cup away and looked at me.

“I feel like such a slut,” she said, not in the delighted, naughty way she’d sometimes uttered these same words back home, but woe-fully, full of remorse. Usually, this line was my cue to absolve her, reminding her that the sexual double-standard was a thing of the past and telling her that she had every right to go out and have fun, so long as she was being safe.

Instead, I left her hanging. I didn’t know yet whether she’d seen me, whether she knew what had happened on the dance floor, but I wanted her to know that I blamed her. I pinched a corner of my scone and dropped it on my tongue.

“I’m sick of dealing with the same kind of shit from the same kind of chachie guys...”

She turned away to look back out the window. I watched her throat ripple as she swallowed and waited.

“I don’t want to stay here,” I said at last. “I’m flying home early.”

She nodded, her eyes still focussed beyond the window. Then she turned back and told me I couldn’t go. “We can’t let this be the trip,” she said.

She started telling me about why she’d wanted to come here. Despite what I thought, she said, she hadn’t come here for this. She hadn’t come to meet some sexy Australian—certainly not to sleep with a string of them. She didn’t know how we’d ended up stuck in the city. She’d pictured wide open plains and red sandstone hills, kangaroos and koala bears.

We stayed in the café for two hours, talking. At some point, she raised the idea of renting the jeep. She said it would be well worth the money. We could bomb around the outback, unrestrained by a tour bus's schedule. And even though I didn't think I could stomach all that one-on-one time with her, I wanted to get away from Sydney just as badly as she did. And I wanted some experience that could redeem this trip, redeem me.

I've never thought of myself as a survivor. Reading *Lord of the Flies* or watching *Alive*, I couldn't comprehend how those characters could put up with all that stress. Not one to struggle, I imagined myself, in desert island scenarios, simply flinging myself from a cliff in forfeit.

Now here I was, lying on my belly under the jeep to keep out of the sun, my travelling companion dead in the cab above me. At least if it got desperate, there would be kangaroo meat to cut into. I would never have to contemplate that unthinkable last resort of Nando Parrado.

For now, though, I knew I could still find a few snacks and some water in the jeep. We'd been prepared, up to a point: prepared for the heat, prepared to get thirsty, prepared to stop for a picnic. We weren't prepared, however, to spend the extra cash for a jeep with GPS and an emergency calling system. We weren't prepared for things to go so wrong.

I knew enough not to try to leave. Whatever way I wandered, I would be wandering into the unknown. If help found me, it would find me here.

I remembered, fuzzily, this activity we did when I was in elementary school. Our teacher had us imagine a plane crash or a shipwreck and gave us a list of items to rank in order of priority. Then she asked, If you could only grab one thing as you realize your plane's going down in the middle of nowhere, what would you take? Whatever else was on the list, I remember only my an-

swer (a bottle of water) and the correct one (a compact mirror).

I suppose it was an exercise in creative thinking. I'd been so confident in my answer. I knew that people died of thirst before hunger. And in desperate situations, no one cares what they look like.

But the compact mirror, so our teacher said, could be used as a signal. You could reflect sunlight to send an S.O.S. Water could give you a few more hours, but your only true hope of survival was rescue.

I dragged myself out from under the jeep. I didn't have a compact in my purse, but there were mirrors enough on the jeep. I found a rock at the side of the road and used it to smash free a shard of the passenger side mirror. I didn't know who would recognize my signal, didn't know where to direct it, but it was the only thing I could think to do.

The day after our long talk at Starbucks, we picked up the jeep, packed up our things, and checked out of the hostel. We bought groceries, and then we hit the road. Watching the city shrink in the rear-view mirror, we didn't give a thought or a word to the gas we were burning or the kilometres we were putting on the rental. With every klick we put between ourselves and Sydney, the weight of my regret got lighter.

We drove in silence for a long time, and then, at some unspecifiable point on the road, we started to enjoy ourselves. We turned up the radio, Mardi put her foot down on the gas, and we let the last week whip away in the wind. The memory of my dance-floor sin spun off with the highway, as did Danny, school, the past and the future.

We had maps and I had my phone, but we didn't know or care where we were going. We didn't plan ahead. It was by sheer luck that we passed a motel at a little after eight o'clock and decided to call it a night. Again without a thought to my Visa bill or student debt, I put the room on my credit card. We'd

agreed to deal with splitting the expenses once we got back to Canada.

After a simple meal in the diner adjoined to the motel, we went back to our rooms and flopped into our beds. I fell quickly into a dreamless sleep, but it seemed to last for only an instant. I was awoken by Mardi, who climbed into my bed in the middle of the night. Like a child who'd had a bad dream, she squeezed close, pressed her wet cheek against my collar bone. My eyes closed, I grunted and asked what she was doing.

I listened to her muted sobs for a few minutes, fading back into sleep, before she finally managed to ask, "Do you even like me, Maggie?"

"Of course I do," I said. My eyes remained closed though I felt her tip her head back to look up at me.

"The saddest thing is you're my best friend," she said, "and you don't even like me."

With the arm she wasn't lying on, I rubbed my eyes. I tried to blink myself into wakefulness. At last, when I could make out the moonlit furnishings in the room, I turned to face her.

"What is this?"

She wiped her eye and propped herself up on her elbow to look at me. "Am I so...? What's wrong with me? What do I do wrong?"

I withdrew my arm and rolled onto my side. "Are you so what?"

"I don't know, un-...un-..."

"Look, Mardi. We still have to travel together for two weeks. I feel like if we start having a conversation like this..."

"How can you be so hard, Maggie?" she sniffed.

I exhaled slowly before replying. "I don't know what to say, Mardi. You wake me up crying about how I don't like you. I like you. I came on this trip with you, didn't I?"

A full minute passed before she spoke again. She sat up. "Forget it, then." She pushed her hands to her eyes one more time, and then said, cold and steady, "Tomorrow, this never happened."

The next morning, while Mardi was giving the room a final look over and I was checking us out, I told the clerk we wanted to go off into the Outback. I asked him how we could get off the beaten path, out into the wild. He was a kind-looking man, in his late-sixties, I guessed, and he gave me a concerned look as he suggested a few possible options. Removing and replacing his worn ball cap, he told me to be careful, bring a lot of water, watch our speed, our gas. "Some of those old highways really don't get much traffic. I know that's what you girls are looking for, but it can be dangerous if you get stranded."

Thanking him for his advice, I left the office. Back at the jeep, Mardi was digging through her backpack. As I approached, she pulled out a bottle of water and took a swig. "Let's hit the road," she said, her voice bright and merry. She smiled and dropped her large sunglasses down over her eyes. "You drive the first shift." I scanned her face for any evidence of the night before, but her mask was impenetrable. She tossed the water bottle into the back of the jeep and headed around to the passenger side door.

"To the Outback!" I cried, repudiating the night before with even more force. I sprang up into the jeep and popped the keys into the ignition. "Let's go find the middle of this continent."

I was alone in the Outback for a day and a half before anyone found me. I'd spent hours tracing a wide circle around the jeep and flashing my mirror in all directions, though I gave wide berth to the mangled kangaroo and to Mardi's side of the jeep. My signal, the repeated series of short and long glints, went unreceived. At any rate, no emergency

helicopter flew in to rescue me. No envoy of police cars and ambulances rushed to the scene.

I didn't think I'd die out there. Not all the time, anyway. I knew, on some level, that another car would inevitably pass. No highway could be so deserted that there wasn't some idiot, some other pair like Mardi and I, who would wend their way over its crumbling and pocked pavement. The despair that crept up from time to time was the more desperate cousin of what I would feel waiting for an overdue bus, underdressed in the dead of winter. I knew help was coming, someone had to come, but at the same time I couldn't imagine it ever really happening.

I spent the night in the jeep, afraid to remain on the ground where I would be vulnerable to the things that come out in the dark. I curled up on the seat with my back to Mardi, still seeing her just as vividly in my head as I would if I'd been turned the other way. My mind felt like it had been cracked wide open, raw and vulnerable. The night went on and on and on, and for all the horror of the day, I kept returning to the night before and my refusal to comfort the girl now dead beside me.

The next morning I continued flashing my mirror to keep myself occupied. For a while, I moved back and forth around the unsullied sides of the jeep, directing the signal out in all directions. Then, feeling my burnt skin blistering on my shoulders, I sat in the shade of the jeep, only my hands and the mirror shard poking out into the sun. I could feel myself slipping from myself as I tipped the mirror back and forth for hours, achieving nothing.

And then, miraculously, sometime around noon, the far away moan of a vehicle spurred me to my feet. I scrambled up, flashing my mirror and shouting for help, fearful that somehow it wouldn't drive my way. A moment later, the vehicle, another jeep, crested the hill half a kilometre down the highway. I waved my arms over my head and called for help.

As it rumbled towards me, I broke down in sobs. Two men, in their early thirties or thereabouts, looked down at me and over to the crashed jeep as they slowed and stopped in the middle of the highway. "Holy shit," the driver breathed. "Are you okay?"

I collapsed back onto the earth, nodding and repeating through my tears, "I'm all right. I'm all right." I was so thankful to get to stop hoping, to stop starving and waiting and thinking. To escape Mardi.

Since she'd walked into my first-year English class, I'd believed I was better than her. I'd known, hadn't questioned, that even though we looked almost identical, she was nothing more than those looks we shared: a former cheerleader, a boy-crazy airhead, a depthless, pretty shell. I'd been a cheerleader, too, but I did it only with an eye to university applications. I'd dated a lot, but guys weren't interested only because I was hot; I had the personality and intelligence to match. And I acted for myself. I did what I wanted to do, while she always deferred to the cutest guy in the room.

Mardi'd never really proved me wrong. Her thoughtless racist comments—"Now there's an affirmative action hire," or, "Honestly, it's been, like, four hundred years. Why can't they just get over it?"—her ceaseless flirting and giggling, and the way she went home with all those guys, expecting a relationship to bloom out of a one-night stand... I knew so much better than she did.

Mardi considered me her best friend, and she died right next to me. But instead of mourning her, I've spent these past months trying to convince myself that we weren't ever the same. The people who thought of us as twins didn't know us. They didn't know me, anyway. It's not just luck that I'm the one still here, after all; I'm the one who wore a seatbelt. ▲