

Readied

Liza Peapell

I close my bedroom door. Some days it is a prison, and others, it is a sanctuary. It took all my effort to turn the handle before I could breathe out and then in again. The sour smell—a pungent combination of sweat, Tweeties and dank sheets—both comforting and torturous, now shut on the other side. I roll my neck and hear that familiar crunching, a habit my mother hates.

"Don't do that. Your neck will break!" Mum looked horrified.

"Not today, Mum," I reply spitefully.

I stand there, eyeing her—her pity; distasteful. I remind myself that I deserve this. I am a thirty-two-year-old woman living at home with chronic anxiety. My life is shameful.

The mop drips and leaves pools of soapy water on the floor; fresh pine and eucalyptus. I tiptoe past. My mother resists the urge to complain about the wet floors with my footprints. Dad is in his Lazy Boy armchair asleep, cigarette extinguished. It is midday—the coolness of the Tasmanian air, already heavy. I haven't been awake long. Sweat beads form on my brow, and I could feel the drum in my veins. My assigned homework is almost complete; I check my phone. It had been twenty-eight minutes. Doctor's orders: get dressed, open your bedroom door, step outside of your room, progress. These things terrify me. I blink my eyelids hard. Trying not to think about how my life has changed.

It had happened quickly—succinct chaos of misadventure in my early twenties. The only boy I had loved broke up with me before the summer break, and on that same day, I was swiped by a car on French Street, shattering both my femur and collar bone. A cascade of repercussions ensued—a hospital stay of three months, a move from

freedom to living back with my elderly parents. Crippled and alone, mobility compromised. The worst followed. I became reclusive, unable to leave my house. It didn't feel like home, though. Fear became my friend. Fast forward ten years, and my life, all-consuming like it is a revolution.

My memory, the trickster, pained with anxiety, like an out of focus polaroid, hazy and blurry. The notification alerts in my pocket. A photo. Friends tagged together. I am uncomfortable. Dad unawakened, mum empties the water bucket, I retreat, unable to stand with the discomfort. I turn the handle, slip into the duvet and close my eyes. Flick the phone to silent: day two thousand, seven hundred and six.

I press play. A peaceful harmony transports me to another place outside of these common walls. Tranquil, I could see the colour green like sage and mint combined. My legs ache, from nothing in particular, a mystery pain. I swing them over the edge of the bed and shuffle my feet along the carpet like I am dancing. I listen to the highs and lows of the spiritual tune. It reminds me of a different time and place — images, like flashes all at once. I stop. It built slowly, that familiar thrum, electric to the tips of each finger. The song finishes, and the silence bellows. I open my eyes. Sparks of silver flicker in the corners; I kneel to the floor, praying for relief. A tear escapes. Homework complete. The tally mark lined. Another day over.

Comfort. Safety. Escape, words written in my leather-bound notebook. I opened it. The black ink bled into the pages. It was the set of rules I lived by when I was younger. Ten specific rules for my eyes only. Diary entries of a person I couldn't remember. Dated; feelings of joy and fear. My finger traces rule number seven. It was in capital letters: Do not pass M.M Library after eight-thirty. I wait. Nothing came. I turn the page. Words that ran into each other as if I was purging them. Aching expressions of betrayal and hatred. My vision narrows. I slump into my pillow and let out a scream trying to hurry the process along. This is what he had asked me to do. The recollection is unbearable. I try to breathe through it. Do what was asked. Try, fail. Breathe.

I ignore the knock at my door. I hear mum's slippers shuffle down the hallway. It is early. My mouth feels furry, and my head is pounding. Exhausted, I slump back into my bed until my bladder protests. Something's not quite right; there is a flurry of noise in

the house. Unfamiliar. I don't feel right. I concentrate on holding my breath and listen from behind my door. The voices are calm but authoritative. An automated robotic agent is giving instructions. Without thinking, I open my door. I witness a scene that oddly looks familiar, as if I was the patient again. He lay there. Lifeless. My aging mother beside him. Nightdress, robed, a scarf around her head. She doesn't look like herself. The ambulance officers are treating him.

My heart is racing. I focus on the only thing I know how to do; be invisible, be nothing. Wordless, I observe the officers and my mother impactfully contributing. More officers arrive. They place a tube down his throat attached to a cylindrical bag. In and out. It is calming amongst the confusion—that repetitive rhythm. I shuffle, foot to foot. Forward, backwards. My only effect.

Carnage and debris, the lounge room is covered in foreign material, that retreat feeling returns. My mother disappears and changes out of her nightwear. She exchanges me a look.

'Are you going to come to the hospital with me, Libby?'

I shake my head uncontrollably.

'I can't, mum. I don't know how.' I stammer, cemented to the spot. The officers wheel him from the house. They look back at me. I am rattled. They know. Don't they. Intrinsic shame consumes me; that is my father. The prison walls close in tighter. Mum leaves. The front door left ajar. I walk towards it and hear the faint sirens in the background. I am too big in this space.

I flick open my phone and dial the number.

'Dr Sanjeev, help me.'

He listened as I rambled, overly explaining the last thirty minutes. How I couldn't move and how I was more trapped than I had ever been.

"I have to." I paused. "Get it together. Before something awful happens to my dad". I sobbed.

It was my turn to listen. I scribbled my new set of rules, ones that felt impossible, but I was willing to at the very least try. I wandered to each corner of the room as ordered. Moving an item from each, collecting and replacing it. A pattern of sorts. What I left in one, I would take from another. I stretched myself. I went into rooms I hadn't been in for

years. I repeated that. I open the front door and leave it ajar. With every pass, I open it a little further. Dr Sanjeev instructed that he had sent a car, and in thirty minutes, it would wait in the driveway and take me to the hospital. He would meet me there. The panic arose when he said that. The possible impossibility. Entirely alone with a set of tasks to finish to reach my dad and be beside my mum. My phone vibrates in my pocket.

Convulsing, my body reacts to the caller.

"Hi, Mum. I am here. I am coming."

Liza Peapell is a novice writer from Brisbane, Queensland. She lives with her husband of twenty-five years, two amazing daughters and dog Clementine. She is a member of the Queensland Writers Centre and actively participates in writing courses. Although her passion is creativity her work centres on working with vulnerable people through her charity The Hangar - an aviation-based youth mentoring program. If she is not working, Liza will be writing, painting, playing the piano or reading.