

MORGAN

35 Morgan's task at the christening was to stand with a candle as part of the backdrop, looking out on the crowd of three dozen or so. No conspicuous tabloid representation, but she imagined any of the unknown faces had 'media mole' potential. Both sets of parents were sitting together in a front pew. Georgia's were keenest for their grandchild to be registered, but there was also that general, pragmatic concern of admission to Catholic schools. Morgan was in a denim jacket, and she'd recently brightened her hair. Her own baby was doing laps of a playground with Callum, owing to its propensity for tantrums. Little Jack, meanwhile, was swaddled, serene, Christ-like. Morgan's brother and Georgia presented their son with full confidence a dunk in the font wouldn't also signify tipping his equilibrium. When the Filipino priest made some comment about the candidate's perfect, six-month-old grace to the admiring crowd, the worm in Morgan predictably and terribly roared, pulsing from her stomach, burning the veins along her forearms. Her eyes widened and rolled. Of course, she knew the danger of this. As Statue of Liberty, clutching the flame, she wasn't supposed to move, least of all for performing a fed-up gesture towards her godchild. Too innocent for such treatment, he was; for *all* of this. Morgan worried that someone in the pews had caught the eye roll, and, not wanting to confirm such cause for shame, she tilted her gaze determinedly away. She fixated on the confession booth, the wooden chamber of secrets at one of the church's flanks, and as she tried to ignore the plangent crying she was now hearing or imagining from the distant schoolyard, she wondered if that lonely box wasn't the place the worm had really sprung from. *Careful how you define yourself*. It struck Morgan that the dark booth, for a different sacrament, might have been a birthplace of sorts.

9 She lingered at the kitchen table awhile, dishwater sloshing like her thoughts, until her mother came out with pink hands and asked her what the matter was. Good phrasing, maybe, because Morgan's essential predicament, just a few years past bed-wetting, was the need to *choose* one. In the chair opposite, her father continued an unseemly, hours-long affair with the Saturday newspaper. Her mother closed the dining-room door, blocking her twin brother from the impending conference. Canned laughter from the TV made Morgan feel silly for thinking so hard. She looked to her mother, her legs and feet just long enough to graze the floorboards, and asked, "What do *you* think I should say?" Which got a sigh. Morgan's face went sullen in an attempt to look adorable. Her mother took a seat, and stared across at a barrier of war news until she was finally able to penetrate and claim the attention of her off-sider. He shrugged as he folded the paper. Said to Morgan, "It's important to remember you're very *good*, overall." There was a gallery of pencil drawings – bush and beach scenes

– covering their fridge, held up by a contest of takeaway magnets. Despite having the better of most other elements, young Morgan was famously annoyed her male twin showed more of a knack for drawing dolphins. Also, the fridge had pictures from a school concert where she'd played one of the dwarves, giving an extremely believable turn as 'Grumpy'. These were the convenient pieces of evidence her parents had probably drawn upon.

9/10 Her brother won a tennis tournament. He was anointed a 'club champion' of the red courts beside the McDonald's where a celebratory lunch was cobbled. Ate his nuggets like: *God, I've earned these*. The trophy-makers had forgotten to add an age group to the placard, and Morgan felt this was partly his grounds for carrying on like he'd been crowned a bit *more* than the don of the under 10s. She admitted his 'title' was reward for all the afternoons belting a ball against the wall that was also the exterior to her bedroom, thus interrupting her reading or daydreaming. In this light, the prize represented an endurance feat for them both. But at their next birthday, she couldn't help using her own cards to paper-over the shining tennis player, the silver server, on their mantelpiece. It was in her nature.

33 Maybe she hadn't ever read a gossip magazine, apart from crosswords at the hairdressers in youth. In the extraordinary two-page nuptial spread, they were standing on the beach in white, barefoot. Their background – which technically included Morgan – in soft focus. The title was an indictable tennis pun utilising 'love'. Needless to say, the worm, Morgan's lesser life companion, was roused in the tum that presently neighboured a foetus, and to quell any further protests she returned her mother's copy of the magazine to the coffee table her brother had once bought with tournament money. Even with those pictures pressed and hidden, her mother kept waxing lyrical about how *beautiful* Georgia had looked. Which was true, however she seemed to be saying this without any cognisance of the Photoshop. Morgan bought her own copy of the magazine from the supermarket because she thought it was a 'nice' thing to do, but the worm couldn't help making some later comment, to Callum, about her brother's crooked smile, and the way the wind had whipped across the beach that day and upset Georgia's hair. Callum said, in response, that Morgan really ought to try his meditation class, 'baby-brain' notwithstanding. She hated when he attempted prescribing spirituality, but figured to yield was the only way to stop him. Plus, she knew he was right. When she began soon afterwards, it was on the condition they were never in the same room.

10 Her friend, Georgia, received a new puppy for no special reason. They were too young to infer it was probably for a parent's mental health. It was brown, explosively fluffy. The breed name was appropriate, said Georgia, because he also came with 'oodles' of love. Stupid, giddy observation. Morgan was scratching the belly of one of the cutest animals in the world – a calendar dog, practically – eating afternoon tea on Georgia's lawn, and yet she felt the wormy movement of something in her own gut, up to her chest, that was hardly supposed to be there anymore, if indeed she was serious about righteousness, going to heaven, et cetera.

30 Everyone getting promotions in a spate that led to questioning the legitimacy of it all, that made Morgan glad for hoarding a skerrick of God, as some kind of explainer as to what, exactly, was the force conspired against her. Georgia commandeering her morning show, scheduling A-listers, declaring she hardly felt herself to be working. Meg, meanwhile, working slavishly, but it was all to do with the altitude of her law firm. Sienna, in e-commerce, awarding *herself* an upgrade by moving to Berlin. And Georgia's beau landing on his feet as a TV commentator and a coach with a sporting institute, though Morgan suspected, any day now, he'd have the epiphany that contained there being more to life than tennis. Morgan had shifted back to Melbourne, was still with the Department of Defence. She hadn't climbed with respect to anything besides the weather, and the height of the office-tower, as the worm was at pains to remind.

11 She wrote a very convincing piece for school about why Australia should accept more refugees. She wouldn't have admitted to most of its ideas coming via a guy on a panel show, partly because she wasn't so appreciative of this herself. Her teacher, on handing it back a week later, first thing of a morning, said she might have wanted to consider a career as a diplomat. Morgan had this figured as something that involved a full security clearance and nuclear codes, but abandoned any drive to inquiry by the end of the day, in any case, because Georgia's 'rip-snorter' about Thai food being superior to Italian was read aloud to the class. Once home, she lolled around for an evening, grumbling about how unfair that had all been to the mental, gastric, vascular mental entity newly recognised as 'the worm'.

29 It was her brother who announced the relationship, near the end of a phone call that otherwise had been about hip cartilage and the way athletes are among the few human breeds lumped with contemplating mortality *twice*. Morgan had wondered why he'd been so blasé about a depressing topic, then realised he'd been all the while focused on his next agenda item. As they spoke, she was

making pad Thai. Shockingly cold, by the time she got around to eating. Georgia and her brother had been teased about one other as kids, had rekindled after a chance encounter at a gala. There was plenty of convenience about it from Morgan's perspective, but overall she couldn't like their collision. Her brother had stammered, at points, because he had some sibling knowledge of Morgan's mind, knew that she'd feel like an audience, with their display meaning to taunt her. Callum put his plate in the microwave and claimed to have guessed it all along. "Get it right," he said. "First reactions to these kinds of things are important." It didn't need to be a worm event specifically, but that heathen creature in Morgan found a way. The amorous aspect of Callum, meanwhile, couldn't find a way in for several weeks.

13 She caught that classic high-school malady of being grumpy towards an old friend (Georgia) for dragging new ones into their circle. Her particular strain affected her viciously, given her immunity was already compromised by her special foible. Being alert to it since nine years old was little help. She tried to mask it, but if Georgia was ever absent from a class, Meg and Sienna gave space warily, like cavoodles waiting timid for their welcome to the table.

28 Morgan plodding in old runners through a prized suburb, as good as asleep to traffic noise, birds, leaves breaking underfoot. Her mind droned about the 'sold' announcements thickening lately across her social media – pertaining to houses or, in the case of engagements, those dullards' own bodies. Tacky, ritualistic, self-congratulatory *spam*. The worm was aboard and proposed Morgan become an internet vigilante, known by a pantomime mask, who'd comment beneath such images, *So Old!* One letter difference, simple genius. Weeks later, when Callum made a pitch beside a love-piece he'd commissioned at the Frankston Sand Sculpting Festival, Morgan recollected, of course, *So Old!*, but buried it hard. She wrapped around Callum while he was still propped. Rescuing him from the awkwardness, just as she felt *him* to be rescuing *her*, to some non-trivial extent. Hereafter, she'd lapse into wondering whether the force amok in her was the same pulling *everybody* towards similar lives.

15 Although she'd shed most religious pretence, there were vestiges of prayer in how, each evening, when not sleeping over somewhere, she'd stare up at shadows made by two energy-saving light-bulbs too big for their sockets and wish hard for boobs. When Meg got an express delivery without any such traceable effort of concentration, the worm horrifically wished these be

harbingers of cancer. Morgan chastised it – or herself – very severely. Aloud, she only quipped that those bags would spell trouble if Meg ever needed to run somewhere *fast*.

34

The first centre had been alright. She didn't mind Buddhist leanings, but there'd come an evening when they'd drifted strangely into talk of reincarnation and demon-slaying, and Morgan was afraid of growing to take this seriously. Callum blamed the quirks of a certain teacher, but Morgan still searched for another place. She milked the scariness of demons as an excuse for migrating somewhere that didn't feel more the preserve of her husband. Because she was still pursuing the same kind of meditation, she couldn't find anywhere that didn't at least keep a few common trimmings. She couldn't be rid of maroon and yellow walls, as it turned out, and oil paintings of mountain ranges that met the quality of a social 'paint and piss-up' evening. Couldn't be rid of meditation partners so bony they made her pleased to still be baby-bloated. Couldn't escape the multitude of cushions, as if these centres doubled as stockists. She wondered if they wouldn't all have felt better by simply fighting with those cushions – whacking each other more fiercely as weeks went by and they got to know each other better. She'd think back to a pillow torn on a beach holiday. Morgan's debut class at her *personal* centre was led by a short-haired woman draped in a yellow throw. The woman claimed three decades of experience – a length that suggested some of her primitive 'teaching' was also being counted. She greeted others in the semi-circle with such calm familiarity that Morgan was a little shocked by the extent she herself came to be interviewed, as a newcomer. Rather than speaking of a stressful home, the way her child's crying seemingly came from the walls and made her think *moving* was perhaps the answer, she fell back into her usual reason for meditation – curtailing an old impulse. To a semi-circle that seemed to care, she explained her personality defects. "Well, careful how you define yourself," the teacher soothed. Morgan hated this statement for its truth; a level of hate you weren't supposed to muster towards someone who presented so kindly. She bristled at almost everything that was said for the proceeding half-hour while they were all defenceless, eyes closed, following chests or bellies. She was advised to straighten her spine – impossible when her problem was an invertebrate. It resented any person who talked as though *they* had all the answers. As though it (and, by extension, Morgan) no longer had to do anything to get to the bottom of existence, should just sit and listen. Morgan didn't dispute any of what the teacher was saying, but surer believed in some kind of human curse – like the tongues of Babel – whereby the closer somebody got to the crux of things, the more painful and pretentious they were to endure. She wished to be led in such a careful, shifty way as to make her think she'd stumbled upon all wisdom herself. The kind of pupil who wanted her own 'pupildom' hidden.

24 Her brother won a tennis tournament. In Kazakhstan, but still it was appreciated in the sporting pages, called the ‘ignition’ of his career. Far away, Morgan had moved to Canberra to work in Defence, old warmonger that she was. It was the first rung in a ladder whose murky zenith, she hoped, rested against an ambassadorship somewhere, someday. She listened to podcasts of the radio show Georgia produced on long walks around Burley Griffin, whenever the worm allowed. These days, that inner curmudgeon devoted most of its energy to any amorous projections that came through the non-walls of her sharehouse. When Morgan met Callum, at a party, they got horribly mired in his work as a data scientist for Agriculture. He said it felt like a dream job. “Good for you!” Morgan blurted, with a tinge of aggression, and then she apologised. She admitted to him, straight out of the gate, what kind of person she was. Later, he revealed he’d only said ‘dream job’ because he’d assumed contentedness was attractive, and that, in truth, they were as muddled as each other. Honestly hadn’t known her twin was the tennis player, he also claimed.

18 Of course, she wanted to be rid of the worm, but if she’d been given the chance, in a kind of magical scenario, she may have resisted out of fear she’d lose something valuable or essential to herself. In light of such hesitancy, the thing was very much present at the showcourts when she watched her brother trying to qualify for a first significant tournament. He had match points and during one she worried ridiculously, for ten seconds, about becoming best known as his sister. He wasn’t ready, in the end, but she felt as much to blame.

22 Morgan was drunk and in discussion with sober Georgia, sitting on public lawn as breakaways from a house party near the museum. Was their friendship ‘ancient’ in a way that meant ‘long-standing’ or ‘starting to tire’? Georgia was having problems with Mason, a budding biologist. Morgan had never really liked him, through no fault of his own apart from the possible lack of them. What Georgia wanted was advice, and indeed enough of Morgan was not too vodka-soaked to dole it. Yet a small, missing scrap in Morgan’s willpower caused her to lose focus, to mutter something vague, to slump back on wet grass at the bidding of half a dozen stars making it through the city fuzz. What she had in reserve, she spent on wishes of her own.

26 Only in bedsheets, with coastal breeze shaking the gums beyond the window, and the sea somehow discernible to a nose. In fact, not the sea; the holiday sex. Callum refitted his glasses to return to his phone. His gorilla chest, she thought, made him appear sensible. Their exact

spatiotemporal location was the New South Wales coast in January, one year into dating, but her own Great Diverter suddenly had her mourning she wasn't among the lucky few who'd enjoyed a white Christmas. Callum saw the Instagram pictures, from Strasbourg or somewhere of the ilk, and read her thoughts exactly. She claimed not to be able to help it. They discussed her mind at length, playfully, and to close they tore a cushion and snowed each other with its feathers. When they came around, with the owners' cushion destroyed and the place looking like a fox had been loosed in a chook-shed, there remained only old 'goody two shoes' Morgan, embarrassed by what she'd caused. Callum agreed they'd gone too far, but set to cleaning and hardly showed remorse.

9 She'd been in the box for a trial run, so wasn't intimidated by its dark and the grey ring-in behind the grille. They'd mustered priests from other parishes for this carnival of 'first confession'. Maybe, in being presented with a face other than the regular priest, she was being asked to think of this sieve-man as something More. He, a fusty stranger, asked her to admit one of the ways in which she'd 'strayed'. "Was that a euphemism or an intensifier?" Morgan may have countered, if she'd been a bit older. If *bolder*, she may have tried pivoting the spotlight his way by announcing her vice was eavesdropping, thus hinting it wasn't quite necessary to have an emissary between God and little girls. But she was mid primary school, and in a long, green Myer's dress that could as well have been bought from Target, and she was so righteous and nervous she could only say what had been practiced. Muttered, "Sometimes I can get a bit jealous. I think I'm never very happy for other people's successes." Maybe there was a flicker of a smile from the emissary. Morgan's mother had informed, with encouraging facetiousness, that her statement was now to be processed by a Holy Calculator. The prescribed prayers were delivered as promptly as if such technology really existed, and, upon returning to her seat, Morgan took to them very fast and seriously. The mass rumbled on, despite her sudden, defiant, mystifying thoughts about how literally *all* the other girls were clothed much nicer.

35 On a Saturday night, almost a week after the christening, she sat in the same pews and took anybody entering the confession booth in such quiet circumstances for a serious sinner. She'd come alone. Sharper reasoning would have suggested Morgan and the worm had been partners since her earliest moments, since the womb, the very spark of her, just as was the case for a host of other behavioural critters she'd never grown to contemplate as much. In fact, in both theories – the superstitious and the coldly biologic – her parents seemed to be implicated. But could such *nice* people as those really have bestowed or taught such a thing? She recalled their goodwill a week ago, in the front pew here, for a faith they'd also drifted from. Whilst Morgan hadn't given God much thought in a while – aside from defending her starved skerrick of belief whenever she meditated with

pagans – couldn't it be, in fact, that in both theories *He* was the culprit? Either He'd allowed a vicious batch of envy to fill her early constituents *or* she'd said something to Him once, in a wooden womb, under a guise of absolution, and instead He'd etched it into her file. *Careful how you define yourself.* Apart from the 'Snow White' concert, she couldn't place much envy from before her first confession – whilst coiled in the pew, she was sorting through disordered episodes, all occurring later – and she therefore wondered if the sacrament properly signified this emotion intertwining with her story. Now, she meant to effect a reset. She hadn't been to confession since, perhaps because she wouldn't have liked to return time and again with the same weakness. Morgan waited for her consultation as 'Jesus pop' washed from speakers overhead. She botched several opportunities, losing out to older parishioners who simply wanted the booth *more*. Maybe they came every few weeks. Never so much apprehension about visiting the dentist, for example, if you were a person good at keeping the schedule. She'd told Callum she was only going to be out walking for an hour or so, and, with social plans looming for their evening, to dawdle any longer felt all the more a kind of infidelity. She found herself in the booth, at last, with the same priest from the Philippines. When he asked for a vice, a little forcefully, she thought back to that word '*eavesdropper*'. She thought again of the dog on the lawn, and '*So-Old!*', and Instagram, and Meg's boobs getting her eaten by a tsunami, and her brother slugging it out on the baseline with the hindrance of an imposter in his supporter's box. And she imagined being 55 and jealous of her nephew's life path versus that of her own progeny. Or 85, tottering, and *worse* at controlling the intensity of a game that had been spinning inside her so long – say, raging that someone else had got a better meal in the nursing home. Or gone, and remembered best for her cantankerousness. The priest was waiting, though – and how to define herself otherwise, after all this time? She imagined nominating *new* vices, not necessarily features of her present, which might have become more comfortable companions. Excessive chocolate consumption, masturbation, or being *too confident* in herself. She'd wanted to cleanse herself of the old definition so badly that she hadn't necessarily put much thought into its replacement. The priest was brown and still as the timbers. She might have softened her face to try and look adorable. She wanted to blurt something devious – "What do *you* think I should say?" – that she was sure he'd got a great many times before. In the end, once she'd become convinced he was starting to suspect her of killing someone, she merely said, "I'm very late for dinner. I promised I'd be back." Like *this* were a sin in itself, and she hurried out of the booth before, heaven forbid, the worm could follow.