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Two Steps Forward is her debut collection of stories.

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TWO STEPS FORWARD



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For Maynard, always

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THE ART OF COURTING

YOU'RE A GOOD NEIGHBOUR. The day is glutted with heat and sweat worms between your breasts, but you still cross the road to help. Not that it's entirely selfless – you saw him arrive, bumbling up to the kerb in a shabby removal truck, and couldn't help yourself.

So you lift packing boxes from the pavement, rough and cracked like an ancient cheek, and they press, too friendly, into your hips. You walk back and forth until your arms ache, but you don't see much of him. He's skittering cat-like in and out of the house, fingers touching everything, marking it with his scent.

You've never seen inside the house and it's really something. Walls in delicate blues and greens, like the inside of a paua shell, and a spiral staircase that your childhood self would have died for. He's filling it up with beautiful things, too – sculptures, furniture straight out of *Vogue Living*. And more books than you've ever seen in one place – bursting out of boxes, stacked in wiggly piles on the floor. As you work, and look for clues, you feel him watching you. It's like a strange dance. You wish you'd put lipstick on.

It's midday before he takes the last box from you. Your fingertips accidentally skim, and you fling your arm away with the shock of it. He looks at you steadily, his eyes a whorl of yellow and hazel, and you know he sees the pink that's galloped up your neck and grabbed hold of your cheeks. You laugh falteringly through this blushing, feeling seventeen, not forty-seven.

He puts the box down at his feet. And then he touches you, gently, a stroke that finds your upper arm. It's nothing really, you tell yourself, just a friendly thank you. He says those words too, but there's a softness in his touch that no man has shown you in years, and everything melts away. The trees are rustling their leaves like gowns of taffeta and a honey ant is battering your big toe and the bash of the sun is hot against your neck, but you only notice him. The slight horse-

flare of his nostrils as he tucks one hand into his jeans pocket and the sweet, sweaty smell of him and the plume of hair that reminds you of hills filled with baked yellow grass, waist-high and scratchy on trailing fingers.

‘See you round then,’ you say with unfelt flippancy.

He nods with a smile, and you’re basking in that, it’s thrumming through your veins. You’re full up with words you want to spill all over him. But you don’t, you couldn’t possibly, so you quickly grab at his smell one more time and bury it deep inside you before walking back across the street. He’s following you, with his eyes not his feet, but he might as well be because you feel him just as close. And though the sun’s press is heavy against you a chilly thrill rushes down your spine.

You’re standing at the kitchen bench making Aaron’s sandwiches for school. He’s shovelling in big spoonfuls of Nutri-Grain when you ask: ‘So who’s the girl?’

You try to be casual but the words come out sounding like a badly read script.

‘What girl?’ he says. Pretending, you think.

‘You know the one. At school yesterday. The pretty one *making eyes* at you when you left.’

You want to be light, funny, but somehow you always get the lingo wrong.

‘Oh Ma,’ he says. ‘Where do you get that stuff from?’

You concentrate on the chopping board. ‘Well?’ you say. Now you *really* want to know and you’re feeling like one of those TV show cops interrogating a suspect.

‘Well what?’ he says, smirking.

He scrapes his chair back, the way you’ve told him not to a thousand times, and grabs his lunchbox.

‘Gotta go. See you later.’

The flyscreen door slaps in staccato, and you’re left staring at the mess he’s left you.

The day is already shrinking into a violet sky, the moon a shiny, tin-foil fold. You’re sitting on your bed amongst the window’s curtain-flap, breathing the lush air. The heat has softened into a warm soak, but you’re feeling jagged. Each time the curtain wings out you see his house, strangely silent and secretive. There are no lights on, but the windows are full of the flickering blonde smears of candles. You strain your eyes with the looking, but you don’t catch even a fragment of him. You’re shocking yourself with the hook of these feelings. You’ve been man-less so long you’ve forgotten the heat of

it all. And you're pushing thoughts aside as they're punching their way in – about the ridiculousness of your want, so unexpected, so forceful. You lie on the bed in a croissant-shaped curve and fantasise in a state of half-sleep.

You're running late for an appointment. You fought with Aaron over the state of his room. It harbours pockets of mould, and you can't stand the thought of it. Secretly growing in the dark. But sometimes you hear yourself nagging and even you feel fed up with yourself.

You're tumbling out of the door so fast that you almost ruin it – a pool of brightly coloured letters on the doorstep, the chunky kind that kids snap onto the fridge. But the words they spell are not childish, not in the least.

Soft quivers the fleshy moon.

The words reach into your core, as if penetrating your dream life. You bend down and hurriedly stuff the letters into your pocket, praying Aaron doesn't catch you.

In the car you digest the phrase over and over, running it around your mouth like a good wine. You're quivering, uncontrollably. You pull over to the side of the road and, despite your lateness, smile for long minutes at the dashboard.

They're kissing. Canoodling you once called it, and Aaron looked embarrassed to know you. You're not one of those cool mums. Sometimes you can't understand him. Like the way he wears his trousers so low, with bright boxer shorts exposed, so that you're always frightened they'll fall down. Or his music, full of screaming and swearing. Or times like now, when he's clearly not your little boy. When he's playing at being a man.

You don't want to watch, to be a shadow in the hallway. It makes you feel itchy-skinned. But you're caught.

Their lips make slurping noises, like a plughole sucking the last of a bath dry. His thin, pale chest is bare. Her fingers curl around the back of his neck where you know the hair is still soft. The light is pushing through the window, and the girl's hair is a brilliant fox-red flame. Her skin is creamy, freckle-clotted, like milk mixed with Milo. Aaron has one hand pressed into her knee, the other is strangled inside his jeans' pocket. You notice his Bugs Bunny boxer shorts and feel a strange sadness, quiet and seeping, that you can't quite explain. It's as if you've lost him already – that boy who hugged you often; that child who was once yours.

You walk outside and sit on the step, and try to lose yourself in the sky, which is smeared with luminous colours. It's a child's joyful painting, like the pieces of coarse paper

you claimed as masterpieces years ago and still have, folded into careful squares, each dated in neatly formed script on the back. Aaron would roll his eyes if he knew of this secret stash. You sigh, wishing time didn't march forward so aggressively.

All day you've been longing for an evening slumped into the sofa, for comfort food and a soppy DVD. Aaron scoffs teenage-surlily at anything that announces itself as romantic comedy, but tonight, strangely, you're able to bribe him to join you with a mound of dripping yellow popcorn.

It's *Sleepless in Seattle*. You've always disliked Tom Hanks, and Meg Ryan's flossiness borders on irritating, yet there's something about this movie that gets you every time. You're swelling up, bloated with the emotion of it, and as the credits roll across the screen you're rubbing knots of tissue across your cheeks.

Aaron's unusually quiet and you give him a sniffley smile.

'Don't worry, Mum,' he says, his voice careful, too gentle. 'I'm sure you'll find someone.'

He places his hand awkwardly on your knee, and withdraws it just as quickly, mumbling something about school and bed. You weren't thinking that way at all, but now you

are. Soft and sorry feelings bloom inside you as you cradle the tissue box.

You're a wad of nerves for what you're about to do. Your heart is cymbal-loud and your breathing is whipped. It's all because of the slim volume of poetry sticking to your palm. You're not a poet but you're feeling poetic. You've carefully pressed words onto the title page. *A sky like velvet against my cheek.*

You're not even sure what they mean. But when you speak them aloud you imagine him doing the same, and a thrill darts through you. You drop it in his letterbox and there's the clench of your heart, fist-tight. You practically sprint home.

'How do you know?' Aaron asks.

His question cuts the comfortable silence that has settled over you both like a milky skin. You glance up from your book. 'Know what?'

'When you're in love.'

He's stroking the fluff on his chin that's struggling to become a beard.

'You just know,' you say. 'But sometimes you think you know and really you're just being swept up in some fantasy

that's bound to end badly.' You close your book. 'Like with your dad.'

He nods. He's known this forever. Before he could walk, talk, before he could understand adult codes.

'Are you in love?' you ask quietly.

'Maybe.' His face is serious, concerned, as if he's trying to figure out a difficult puzzle. Then it breaks into a roguish smile. 'But it could just be lust!'

It's shopping day and you're lugging green bags into the kitchen, piling them on the floor. You start unpacking carefully, your kitchen cupboards are Virgo-neat. Aaron calls them *Sleeping-with-the-Enemy*-scary because you flip out over disorderly tins, or packets of pasta that he tosses back without consideration for your system.

You're mulling over this admitted obsession when your eye catches the dining-room table. On it is a plate like Chantilly lace, and in its centre is a large wedge of chocolate cake. It's oozing chocolate sauce and you find your mouth suddenly gathering saliva, your head tumbled full of questions. There's no card, no acknowledgement, but you know it's from him.

You're still suspended in front of it, like a stilled puppet, when Aaron crashes through the door.

‘Oh yum,’ he says, and he’s steamrolling towards it. You quickly curve your arm around in front of it, shielding it from him.

‘It’s for me,’ you say, surprised at this possessiveness. ‘It’s mine.’

The evening is a warm thrum, pink-coated and mellow. But you’re jittery, caffeine-high. You’re wearing a new petticoat. Black, edged with lacy teeth. It’s like a caress against your skin. Aaron is staying at a mate’s house, playing video games, eating pizza. Or so he says. He could be anywhere, attached to the freckled girl.

You play dress-ups. Crazy, a woman of your age, but you don’t care. You coat your lips in a shiny pink slick. An old tiara, with plastic diamonds, feels delicious in your hair.

You fish out a half-full packet of cigarettes from under the bed. Menthol, because you’re not really a smoker. You flop onto the mattress, your head slotting neatly into the saddled pillow. You blow smoke at the ceiling and let an inch of knobbled ash grow on the cigarette. You feel like a movie siren.

The cigarette has given you a heady rush and you walk boldly out of the house. Bare feet, petticoat, tiara. Outside, the night is warm. Street lamps tint the ceiling of cloud a dusty plum. The trees are a gathering of English gentlemen, silent and upright. There's not even a tickle of wind. Everything has relaxed into stillness.

You gulp the air in great rucking breaths and wrinkle your toes against the concrete. There's a certain magic in being alone, in the middle of the road, on a plum-coloured night. And you're walking as if you're an aisle-bound bride, the houses hushed guests. You're stretching your arms wide and twirling in circles, your face tilted to the sky.

Then you're off down the street, away, skipping. Your petticoat jerks from thigh to hip and, feeling decidedly wicked, you start singing *Knees up Mother Brown*. Quietly at first and then louder, until the street is resounding with it.

It's the same battle but this time it's different. You're standing in his door-frame asking him, *telling* him to tidy his room. You're in the middle of a diatribe about responsibility and cleanliness and him being old enough to know better when he cracks.

‘Just *shut up*, will you,’ he screams. His face is puffed up with rage, ugly.

‘It’s for your own good.’

He picks up a shoe and hurls it at the wall.

‘Jesus, Aaron,’ you shout, and you can hear your voice rising higher, about to split. ‘You’re behaving like a bloody two-year-old.’

‘You chicks are all the same,’ he spits and shoves past you, escapes.

And then you know it’s not really about you or the room or the clothes on the floor, it’s about the girl. You wonder what she’s done.

Now when you wake your breath catches in your chest. You don’t lie lengthening amidst the alarm-jangle like before. Instead you grip the day hard, with expectation and longing.

But this morning you’re disappointed. The house is blank, untouched. And you sink slowly.

You fall into routine – putting clothes, food, dishes into their respective places – but then the mirror traps you in its unfriendly grip. You notice how thin your lips have become, how the flash of greasy fuchsia looks almost crude. You pull at the loose skin on your neck, and the spongy puffs

around your eyes filled with lines, the skeleton veins of a dead leaf.

You mentally list and categorise your faults. Yellowing toenails that you hide with paint, stretch marks that rim your belly like old elastic, the downward slope of your breasts. And you wonder if this is all just a game to him.

A day leaking away with a spill of apricot. Air stung with lavender. A heavy handbag slaps into your thigh as you hoick your body out of the car. And then this: a flowerpot of daisies on your doorstep. Among their leggy green limbs you find a square of card: *For the jewelled princess.*

‘So what happened?’ you ask.

Aaron shrugs as if he can’t be bothered talking about it. But you see the way his face changes, looks almost pained.

‘Did you break up?’ you press, gently.

‘I guess,’ he says. ‘Don’t really know.’

He looks like a child again, his bravado gone.

‘What do you mean?’

He shrugs again. ‘She kinda just stopped talking to me. She’s just been ignoring me at lunch and avoiding me.’

‘Why don’t you call her? Find out what’s going on.’

He snorts derisively, like you don’t have the faintest clue about anything. But now there’s a look of terror on his face. And as he clatters out the door you can’t help wishing love could be simpler.

The sky is a brazen blue. You walk diagonally across the street, conscious of the way your heels dig small pocks into the bitumen. You knock on his door, quickly, before you change your mind. Your hands are tight fists, but you don’t notice until later that your fingernails are digging a row of fleshy crescents into each palm. For the longest time there’s no answer.

You don’t know why, but you find yourself pushing round the side of the house, past a knot of vines slumped against the wall. Feeling plants graze your legs like spiders, and hearing only the punch of your heart.

You stumble on him unfurling in the bath. Through the wide window you can see foamy bubbles nestled into his hairy chest. The way his leg curves out of the water, so boldly. How the shell of his ear is flushed, full of heat, a crushed rose of deep, dark red. You imagine it to be silky – like the skin of a newborn – which only a lover would know.

The mirror is a fug of steam and you think you're safe, taking him in as if he's a painting in a gallery. But you're mistaken. His head lolls back against the bath's lip and from beneath half-closed eyelids he's watching you watch him. You're the one naked, exposed. But you don't realise this.

It's Saturday. Aaron's tangled in sheets, snoring, but you can't sleep. You went for a walk early, and now you're making tea in the kitchen, trackpants floppy with sweat, hair pulled into a hasty ponytail. As you dump the teabag in the sink you're startled.

It's him. There's a mash of picked flowers in his hand. He's pressing them up against the window, and smiling in a way that's confessional. You smile back, noticing a crease of dirt above one woolly eyebrow. He points in the direction of the front door and you're so close you can see the corrugated groove etched across his nail and the hairs sprouting darkly on his fingers. There's a stain creeping from under his arms and you feel giddy with the thought of his smells. Your heart's darting like a drunken bird and you're moving to the door, forcing your eager feet not to run.

