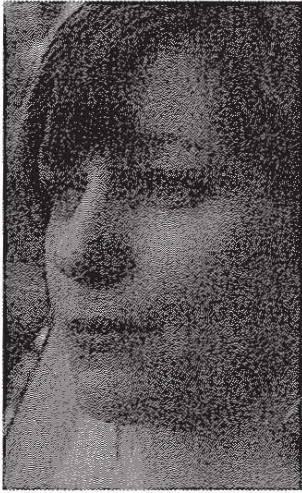


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TREADING AIR

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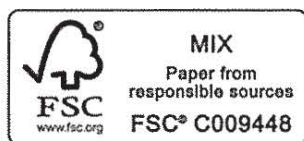
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Brisbane, 1945

In the lock hospital, a woman is on the lookout for metal. Lizzie, lying on her side, watches her lean over in bed to tell poor Marge. The woman's voice reminds Lizzie of something, but she can't get a hold on what – a mosquito maybe, hovering right in her ear. The voice sounds familiar enough for Lizzie to stare hard at the woman's face, but her eyesight is shot, everything smeared at the edges. Sulphathiazole slides through her insides like a lump of concrete and messes around with thoughts in the back of her head. Bloody Yank gave her the clap. By now he's probably sent half a dozen women like her to the lock hospital, to be held off the streets until they're clean. Lizzie nurses her gritted eyes, her lids half-closed.

The woman's telling Marge that she wants one of the metal coathangers at the end of the ward. Their arms have been crocheted with frills that fan out like coral, probably by a charitable sort from the Temperance Union, but there's sharp metal underneath, and the threads will unpick easily enough. Marge says nothing. She complained to Lizzie earlier that she's queasy from drugs they gave her for the syphilis.

Lizzie has Marge down as a good-time gal, an amateur who's doing the old girls like her out of business, sleeping around with the troops for free. Marge hasn't accepted the hospital: the foul smells, the rashes, the liquids that come out of you. The shock and humiliation of it because you're the one who carries the disease and gets locked up – not him, who wanted you so badly he was willing to pay. Girls like Marge make Lizzie think this place is going to the dogs. Old days, Lizzie would meet some of the top girls in here, knew what they were doing. Learnt a few tricks herself on plying the trade. She'd needed all the help she could get, that time of her life, on her own for the first time.

Marge is silent, and the woman after the coathanger lies back down and runs her fingers over hands so lumped with insect bites that even Lizzie's bad eyes can see they're swollen twice their normal size. What does this woman want a coathanger for? Lizzie will have to keep an eye on her or she'll end up stabbed in a rusty trundle bed. Though, if that's the woman's plan, Lizzie doesn't reckon she'd be so liberal in talking about the hanger. More likely, Lizzie will wake up to see the woman with a pool of blood between her legs.

Lizzie shifts on her hollow mattress frame, feeling the dip of broken springs. Her mind returns to Joe. He's getting out of gaol soon. That thought loops around her head, the old longing for him returned. She's been so used to feeling this way for him, seems she can't get out of the habit; there's channels in her body that this flow of feeling has carved into her.

She'd found out about Joe's release by accident, from the magistrate at her trial, Mr Wilson. She was hauled into court after her boss at the laundry grassed on her. Her Yank soldier friend had offered her a deal with ten tins of bully beef and some US Army blankets, if she could sneak them out of the

wash. When the boss caught her stuffing the grey blankets behind one of the tubs, he sent the coppers round to her rooms at the boarding house. All cops in town know her, a working girl, so they ordered an inspection. And that was it, doctor said she had the clap.

At first, in the police court, surrounded by dark wood, she couldn't make sense of what Mr Wilson was saying about Joe. In a wig that hung down his cheeks, he looked at her medical report and decided to be generous: only six weeks in the lock hospital to recover. He said when Joe got out a few days after she had, they could start a new life together. 'We'll try it for an experiment,' Wilson said, and Lizzie wanted to stick her fingers in his eyeballs. She isn't a bloody lab rat.

Can't help herself, though. For the first time in years, she's imagining her and Joe together again. Wilson said he felt sorry for Lizzie, her directionlessness. Like she's a boat that needs steering. God forbid Joe be at the helm. But the thought's in her head now, and maybe they'd both be better this time round. It's been twenty years since he was out.