

# Joanne

**At seventeen** my elder brother Leo had a girlfriend who ditched high-school for graphic-arts school. For his eighteenth birthday she photographed a frosted Fosters can at close-range, blew it up double and set it off against something jet-shiny. Nobody could have told him it wasn't a masterpiece of modern art. Nobody could say it didn't match the International Beers Collection circumnavigating the musty ground-floor bedroom he and I shared.

Rainy Saturday nights we'd all be stuck in the room together. She'd have him pinned to the wall at his bed, nibbling away at his tingling lobes, whispering feather-soft sweet somethings. He'd give her a pained smile and shoot me pained pleading looks. I'd lay there, unmoved, pillow vertical against the wall, hands folded behind my head, taking in *21 Jump Street*. After dozing off watching Richard Wilkins hosting *MTV*, I'd wake to heavy breathing and try not to breathe a sound or move a muscle of my own. Through the dark, hushed exchanges carried.

*I love your arms around me . . .*

*I'll never put them around anyone else . . .*

Long before the finale, I'd have dozed off, again. My first impression of sex, then, was that for any couple, open-endedness was always an option. On and on, and on and on, they'd go, and go and go.

Joanne Duckworth.

What became of her, I haven't a clue.

She had an oval face with dark blue eyes that watered when he made her laugh too hard. She hadn't seen her dad since she was five. She lived with her mother and brother, down behind the state-school, a part of town the streets all felt the same.

"The camera doesn't lie," she was too fond of saying.

For some reason the cliché rubbed me the wrong way. "It's like saying figures don't lie – they do and anyone with a brain *knows* it. Not everything can be photographed like a – like a cute little kitten. There are *forces* . . . invisible forces around us."

"Listen to it," said Leo, "just *listen* to it. *Forces*. What forces, Obi One?"

She came closer with the Ricoh, adjusting the lens. "Here we find a rather rare, rather peculiar specimen. Professor Patrick Lonesome is notoriously hard to film. Prematurely aged and driven insane by crank theories, he's touchy, crabby and easily spooked."

Leo let out a laugh.

"In his presence," she kept up, "one must tread *very* sensitively."

I stared at the TV. “Promise me you two won’t make a baby. Ever. Nature couldn’t cope with that much stupidity in one body.”

*Click*, went the Ricoh. “You’re your own worst enemy.”

“Funny that,” Leo added, “he’s his own best friend, too.”

**One wind-whipped** Sunday not long after Leo had ditched Joanne I spotted her unexpectedly, down the far end of the beach, opposite the Lifesaving Clubhouse; progressing slowly, like somebody retracing her steps, hoping to recover something. She hadn’t yet seen me. A craven impulse to cut for the path up to the esplanade almost got the better of me.

We took our time coming closer. For a weird minute, we were almost in slow-motion. Last night’s storm had churned the sea depositing driftwoods and seagull-feathers and seaweeds and drinking-straws. Frigid sand crunched under my bare soles – this was the winter I was trying to teach myself mental toughness. I gave her a wave. She stared, unsettled, waved back. Then we were face-to-face, stopped.

She looked at my feet. “Aren’t you just . . . a fraction frost-bitten?”

I wiggled stiff toes. “I’m experimenting.”

“With pneumonia?” She reached into a pocket of her duffel-jacket pocket, extracted a tattered tissue hunk and blew a fatigued nose. Only now did I notice her left arm in a sling. She told me how her mother had taken her on a weekend trip to the snow to cheer her up. Half an hour after

they'd parked the car she'd fallen and badly sprained her wrist. "I feel like Wily Coyote."

"Skiing's boring anyway." I excavated a patch of shell-grit with my right foot. "Any sport that needs heaps of equipment bugs me anyway. Anything with gear and padding and special shoes and . . . gloves or . . . or special suits or archery arrows or . . ." I watched the foot doing the digging.

"The veins look like little rivers on a map," she said, "aerial shot." She lapsed into some kind of daze; snapped out of it and looked up at the frigid water. A low-flying cormorant made a curious high-speed double-loop detour around a watermark and swiftly resumed its arrow-straight line.

I asked if she'd finished her project – before she'd stopped coming over to our place, she'd been working on a photographic essay called *Reading Strangers*. All the shots showed people reading in unusual places. All the shots showed people reading unusual places: a fisherman using a helmet-light; a woman in a checkout queue; a bus-driver at a red light, big black boots rested on the steering wheel, sports pages of *The Sun* spreadeagled. She'd spent dozens of hours finding them. She'd received a good mark. But she wasn't happy with it.

"I liked it a lot," I picked up a damp stick, "it was unique."

"So was The Elephant Man."

I broke the stick in two and hurled away half. "I cried in that movie."

“Me too.” She crouched, awkwardly, scooped a handful of sand, let it run through her fingers. “Mum tried to stop me watching. She thought it would disturb me.”

“The saddest part was when they got him shitfaced.”

“Did you watch alone?”

“With Leo.”

“And did Leo cry?”

“How should I know?” I slung the stick.

“I’d ask him myself, but he appears to have severed all ties.” She brushed her hands. “What’s he doing today?” She tried sounding indifferent. “Living it up with his new flame?”

I shrugged, browsed in vain for another stick, told her he wasn’t in the house and that was all I knew – as far as I knew he didn’t have a new girlfriend. The truth was we hadn’t said much to each other, recently.

“Patrick did anything ever happen with Leo and another girl? When I was his girlfriend?”

I pumped out six quick tuck-jumps. “How would I know?”

“Ever hear of anything?”

I faced away, picked up a flat brown stone and skimmed it, four, five skips. Half a mile away a speedboat churned. A smaller, slower boat chugged the opposite direction. From where we stood they looked to be on a head on course. “I’d say if I knew – but I don’t.”

As I spoke, she resumed walking, the same direction. I followed, leapt a mound of petite oval-shells, landed in a crescent jellyfish, kicked and shook the squish from between toes.

A fistful of sand kicked up in a gust. She turned her face down, away. “Gee – wonder why we’re the only ones here.”

“Empty beach is a good beach.”

“Did I spoil the ambience?” She was turning a shoulder to the wind, turning her face away; for one moment I thought she’d said ambulance.

I kicked away a Styrofoam cube. “Did I say it was bad you’re here?”

She blew her nose. “But is it *good*, Patrick?”

She blew the nose harder. I stepped around a pinkish-bellied, bloated toadfish I’d stepped around coming the other way. Everywhere you looked was another thing the sea had thrown back: a mini Pert 2 in 1 shampoo & conditioner; a cracked Frisbee; crate-binding tape. Blackish brown, bulbous seaweed mass shivered, all its tessellated tendrils flapping. A brown and dirty-white seabird scratching its black beak saw us in the corner of its dark eye and made a listless, almost half-hearted move, mildly inconvenienced.

In uneasy silence, we gravitated toward the rocks beneath the bluff.

As we walked, my spurned homework loomed – every Sunday afternoon, having postponed study, I’d make a spurious agreement with myself to get it done that night. When night came, invariably, I’d start

watching the Sunday night movie. Halfway through the movie I'd vow to start as soon as the credits rolled. When the credits rolled I'd tell myself I'd wake tomorrow at 6am – with absolutely no distractions.

"I miss your family." She stopped, faced the sea. "I miss the sound of your sister singing along with the radio in her room."

The sea shivered all across the surface like it had a severe case of goose- bumps.

"I miss your mum's pumpkin soups." She stood there, and I stood there with her, and when she next spoke there was a candidness I'd never heard in anybody's voice. "I can't explain how much I miss him. I don't understand why he doesn't want me anymore."

**"Last Sunday . . .** I went for a walk up near your place." She kept eyes down. The black, rough bitumen path to the esplanade was steep and winding and she was hunching a little. "I'd gone there without even realizing, I swear, my legs just – it sounds like such crap but my legs just took me . . . it was like I just kind of was attracted there, without knowing. Anyway what I'm trying to say . . ." She gave me a nervous glance.

I kept my eyes on the bitumen.

"Anyway I saw Leo and Ron and Trevor leaving your place in Trevor's car and for some reason I hid behind a bush and they saw me. I mean I'm

pretty sure they saw me. Leo probably thinks I was spying on him. I wasn't. I swear to God I was just . . .”

“I believe you.”

“I was just *up* there. My legs just kind of *took* me there. I was thinking and thinking and really trying to . . . anyway . . . that's what happened.”

We'd reached the steepest part of the rise.

Staring at the pebbly bitumen she started talking very fast. “I keep wondering if it was a thing I said or did that made him go off me – if I could've said something differently or not said something . . . or if one little thing had been different on one day it would've changed things.” She straightened, took a breath. “Patrick did anyone encourage him to do it – to break up with me?”

“Like who?”

“Like one of his friends or anyone else?”

I hesitated. “For a couple of weeks I didn't even know you two broke up, he didn't say a word . . . mum worked it out.”

She stopped cold. I stopped a step ahead, faced her. She stared at me as if she couldn't believe her ears, like she was in shock. I looked down, at the bitumen between us – a deep fissure like a lightning bolt had caught sand from people's soles.

“Are you saying he didn't *say* anything?”



“He lay on his bed after work every day for a week – just lay there blinking every once in a while at the ceiling. I knew something was the matter . . . just not what.”

“Just not what,” she still sounded stunned.

A tiny finch hopped around a mirror-bush – its tiny chest a rare sort of bright blue. Its entire body would’ve fit in an infant’s palm.

“So . . . so . . . why did he do it?” I said.

“All he said was he didn’t want us to be together anymore.” Staring at the path she sounded as if she was describing it to herself for the thousandth time and each time it was more bamboozling. “When I insisted on more of an explanation he acted like I was a child pestering for a lollipop. Two years. I mean he’d be *so* happy to see me sometimes – he’d be on *such a high* just seeing me and he’d do anything for me. Other times . . . it was like he wasn’t there . . . it was like there was two of him – almost like he had no in-betweens.” She said, after hesitation, “Haven’t you ever felt that about him? Kind of like you’ve got two brothers?”

I plucked a glossy leaf from a mirror bush – it snapped back in spasm.

We started walking up the path again, and once our hands brushed.

Ten minutes later we emerged on the deserted esplanade, drifted to the side with the holiday-houses. On a nature-strip two identical crows traded grievances. One abruptly took to kissing the other’s feet. Orange poppies grown against the outside of somebody’s fence lit up in a burst

of short-lived sunshine. We wound down the esplanade. The wind stiffened again. Holiday home awnings and window-shutters groaned and squeaked. Roller-doors shuddered. Letterbox lids clinked. Leaves skipped across a scrappy gravel drive. When we reached where the houses ran out, instead of walking the hill on the pokey roadside, with oncoming cars, we cut left along the trail by the creek, behind my old primary-school. The primary-school was a short-cut to Main Street, though I hadn't taken it for a while. I took her hand as we climbed the embankment to the school oval. The fleshy hand was cold and slightly bigger than mine and she gripped tight.

The oval was half the size I remembered. My feet clipped the black and yellow daisies sprouting in sporadic plots and I found myself trying not to tramp them down too hard, like I was a gentle giant stepping all over a pretty little town.

Halfway across, Joanne and I had drifted apart.

The sound of her singing carried to me on the wind.

*Whoooo's thaaat girrrl? Runnin around with uuuuu?*

*Tell me*

*Whoooo's that gheerheerrrl*

Along the grass glided a metre-long sheet of butcher paper, undulating like a string-ray across a sea-floor. I trapped it with a sole, scooped it. She

made her way to me. Each of us held an end, standing with backs to the wind. Big green letters read:

*Things I like about myself. 1 Blue Eyes 2 Happy Smile*

The wonky letters almost looked as if they'd been written in a kid's wrong hand, for the challenge.

On the other side we found a crayon drawing – a pink stick-figure bounding through purple grass flying a green and orange kite. The fingers weren't quite touching the string – the stick-figure could've been letting go, or straining to retrieve. I felt certain, absolutely and unambiguously certain, that Joanne was remembering precisely the same day I was: . . . a cold Sunday, just like this one. They'd taken forever assembling a kite from the The Reject Shop by the escalator under Safeway. For some reason Joanne wore a wig from a fancy-dress my mum had been to the night before. The front door slamming in the wind, as they went out laughing with the \$3 kite. . . .

Now she ran across the oval towards the gates opening onto Oakbank Road. I had the sense she was crying. A cypress-pine threw an acorn into her path and she picked it up and passed through the gates, and turned left, and for a minute she was out of my sight.

Walking ahead of me along Oakbank, her shoulders hunched, and she looked bulky, old, and running to her, invisible spittle-rain touched my face.

We passed the sign that said CROSSING AHEAD: a stick-figure woman with a 1950s haircut and a split pelvis held the hand of a little girl. My soles were sore now and I walked up on my toes, for a bit. And we passed a sign with two stick-figures on bicycles: END.

What happened next still feels like more than coincidence.

Neither of us mentioned it – neither of us spoke, in fact – the remainder of the walk to her house.

What happened is this: Ronnie Rosko's Falcon materialized an easy stone's throw from us, heading the opposite way. Rosko and Scott Greenwood sat in the front and the stereo was up full blast. Neither had seen us, though we were unconcealed by trees – as out in the open as we could've been. Joanne stared at the path, not yet having noticed the car.

In the back of the car Leo and a blonde girl sat together. Whatever he was saying he didn't finish – her fingers spread and clamped around him, in full possession. She engulfed him. Joanne's looking up in that very moment felt like fate.

On the next corner, in the bare arms of a poplar, a trapped kite flapped, and flailed.

**The bulb** in our bedroom blew when I flicked the switch.

I turned the TV on for light and yanked open the drawer he threw his odds and ends: seedling-packets, ATM receipts, beer-coasters, bottle-

tops, 5 cent pieces . . . Between a cracked rear-view mirror and a pliers, I found what I was looking for.

The handwriting was clear and forward leaning with long links between letters, like stems in a daisy-chain.

*Hi beautiful.*

*Thank-you for sticking up for me last night. NO guy has ever done that for me. How does it feel to be the first?!? Don't answer that! Yours in love forever, Joanne.*

The front door whirled open and he barrelled in through the hall. I shoved the drawer shut and flung the card under the desk and stuffed the scarf in my pocket, and pretended to be absorbed in *Get Smart*.

He went for the light switch, kicked off his Reeboks, asked why I was standing in the shadows like a feeble ghoul, ripped off his clothes, hurried to the shower off the hall, blasted hot water and stepped in wailing The Wanderer. I knelt and picked up the card and slid it under the drawer's rubble, gazed at the carpet.

*Max, they're waiting – be careful they don't slip anything in your drink.*

*Under control, Ninety-Nine.*

*Max, how can you be so sure?*

Piping water hurled down over his barrel chest as he sang. I sat on the end of his bed. Beside his bed ran a wide window looking onto next-door's ferny front. Dark wind flogged the ferns. I saw Joanne silhouetted

running from behind one Ti-tree trunk to another. My skull prickled, tingled. I blinked, stared . . .

He barrelled into the room steaming and dressed double-speed in semi-dark. “WEEELLLL *I’M* the TYPE of guy, who will Never Settle DOWN . . .”

The rumble of one of Trevor Marriot’s car softly rocking across the craters in the drive carried into the bedroom. Tumbling Dice carried from the speakers. *Always in a hurry, never stop to worry* . . . My brother splashed Blue Stratos on his palms and slapped a hasty noose and ran through the dim hall in socks, clutching grey Rivers. The door slammed. Another opened.