

JACQUELINE MOLLOY

OFFCUTS

I trim the blush red silk into the perfect final squares for the quilt, cutting with care, mindful of the fabric's delicacy. It snags on my calloused, swollen fingers.

The night air slips unchoreographed through my open windows: it is restless and humid making me sleepy but I force myself to concentrate. The silk grows limp and curls under the sharp blades as I snip and shape.

Sydney in December can be stormy and unpredictable: the heat merciless and the warm rain frequent. My windows have been wide open for weeks and every night the same two sounds blend: the repetitive mechanical whir of my upstairs neighbours' sewing machine and the lazy whoosh of the waves breaking on the sand. Tonight is no exception. Even the waves are drowsy as though the heat has done them in.

My neighbour above, Lola, has no such problem. She sews late into the night full of verve and purpose. She makes beautiful dresses for beautiful movie stars. She is an up and coming costume designer – *one to watch* – as they say. It is thanks to her that my quilt exists but she doesn't know that.

Too tired now to sew the final squares into place, I lay the quilt into the cotton storage bag, switch off the lights and savour the darkness.

I imagine, just for a moment, that I am cool.

In bed reading, I am soothed by the steady whirring of Lola's machine, the sluggish waves and the distant bass rumble of thunder. At three am I wake to find my open book sprawled on my chest, sweat lapping in the hollow above my breast bone and my glasses at half mast.

I listen. Silence. Lola and the waves are slumbering.

Disorientated with sleep, I stagger from my bedroom for a glass of water. It takes me a moment to register an unfamiliar scratching noise and I hang back from entering the kitchen.

I regret falling asleep whilst reading a book on the early lives of serial killers. The visions in my head fuelled by the heat, loud scratching and my nocturnal reading choice are violent and bloody, involving axes, nimbly wielded shiny blades and skinny boy-men with missing front teeth and insatiable murderous intent.

I take a breath, hug the wall and flick the light switch on prepared to do battle.

There is a possum in the kitchen.

He stares at me, surprised, his little brown head just visible from the depths of my white Belfast sink. On first glance it looks sweet: on second glance, I take in its pointy talons twitching at the end of its busy claws, doing damage to my reclaimed

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enamel. We make eye contact; a hungry look in its shiny brown eyes. Then it is gone.

Just like that.

A smooth, silent escape back out through the kitchen window and down the sturdy trunk of the avocado tree. I lean over the sink to close the window behind it and plump droplets of tepid rain fall onto my bare arms.

Summer rain in Sydney has a distinct disposition. It creeps up furtively. One afternoon last week the rain was so forceful on Coogee Bay Road that it filled the gutters within minutes. It rushed my feet and stole my left shoe. I watched as my red and white striped ballet pump was battered by the makeshift waves and taken around the corner. I waited, hoping it might be returned on a cross current, but I never saw it again.

Tonight though, I am safe in my flat. The rain can do what it likes. I drift back into sleep; all thoughts of possums and serial killers banished. I am comforted by the quilt on a chair at the end of the bed, imagine it glows from within its protective cover: a spectral of luminosity shadow dancing on the ceiling. I listen to the rain tap dance on my closed windows and wonder if it is wearing my stolen shoe.

The next morning I am woken early as usual by Lola slamming her front door as she leaves for yet another film set. The noise reverberates down through the stairwell, bounces off the tiled floor and dies against the wooden hand rails. Then the *clip clop* of her summer sandals as she makes her way down the stairs.

I wait for it – the sound I wait for every weekday morning – the rustle of plastic as she drops a bag containing last night’s fabric off cuts into the communal wheelie bin. Then thump as she lets the lid fall shut, the beep as she unlocks her red mini, slams the door, revs the engine into life and races up the silent street as though she is being pursued.

Lola is a busy woman, *always on a deadline*, so she once told me.

I throw on a loose, brightly patterned sun dress to combat the already hot morning and shunt any escaped tendrils of my silvery hair back up into the topknot on my head. I follow in Lola’s noisy footsteps with my own light tread.

Outside it is as though the night rain had never fallen: even the cement path is parched. The wheelie bin is sheltered in a discreet spot behind a frangipani tree. Hidden beneath its unruly crimson blooms I remove Lola’s bulging plastic bag. I once read that frangipanis thrive on neglect and have felt in simpatico with it ever since.

I put the kettle on, resist opening the window above the sink in case the possum is a wily opportunist, and tip the contents of the bag onto my kitchen floor. This is my favourite part: watching the wisps of fabric glide onto my cream tiles. The palette is clearly of leading lady calibre: shimmering satins in raspberry hues, organza in periwinkle blue and trims of startlingly white, dainty guipure lace.

A potent blended aroma of Chanel No 5 and last night’s curry accompanies their descent. The final piece – a morsel of shiny gold and red sequined chiffon illuminates my small kitchen like a light from a movie set. Reminds me of childhood and of my mother in luminous ball gowns.

I wonder whose leftover it is, imagine Lola in a sun drenched rehearsal room, with pearl-headed pins stuck into her T Shirt and a worn tape measure around her neck. She would be kneeling at the feet of a starlet who ignores her and gossips into an iPhone while Lola patiently pins and calculates, making notes for alterations in a purple leather note book.

On the rare occasions that our paths cross, Lola is always smiling – and rushing: her arms full of garment bags. Precious cargo. Hush Hush. Top Secret. I'm sure I'm the only one in our building who knows what Lola does.

And who would I tell?

I stroke the fabrics, aware I no longer have a use for them. The quilt is almost finished and is a one off: a special gift.

Time to break the habit.

I replace the bag into the bin just as the clouds release today's first drops of rain. The irritable thunder of last night finally vents itself and I hurry back upstairs. I make myself a coffee while the air around me closes up, unwilling to surrender its heat to the rain.

I spread the quilt over my bed for the last time. It is vibrant and comforting and made up entirely of Lola's discarded fabric, stolen over the past two years.

It holds secrets, scandals and scraps of other lives: glamorous lives that shine with good fortune that most of us can only dream about. I stitch on the final, red silk squares and stand back to admire it while the summer rain rumbas on my windows and the thunder accompanies it with a steady bass beat.

I imagine the look on my daughter's face when she opens my parcel. She has promised me that next year she'd send a plane ticket so I could spend Christmas with her.

Just like she promises every year.

I fold the quilt for the last time, pack it carefully into a large box for posting, and think of my missing shoe still adrift held captive by the summer rain, and of Lola's discarded fabrics. And of the possum, out there hungry and alone in the storm.

I open the kitchen window wide, place a bunch of luscious red grapes in the sink, and wait.