



Jane Godwin

**WHEN
RAIN
TURNS
TO
SNOW**

LOTHIAN

REED

My favourite word is sandal. It feels so open, so clear and simple, it makes me think of a little kid in summer.

A little kid – maybe it's a memory, maybe it's me – now skipping along, now balancing on that bit of concrete at the edge of the gutter.

Wearing

Sandals.

Flat – are they red? – with shiny buckles.

I like the way the word looks. With the two a's like that. And you can make it sound really slow in your mouth.

Not like paddock. Sadie's favourite word is paddock. It's nice to say, but it's a closed, clipped word, like the locking of a gate. You can't linger on paddock like you can on sandal.

Hana's favourite word is serendipity. The slow, sliding 'seren' and then the quick tongue-on-the-roof-of-your-mouth 'dipity'. Satisfying.

And reed. The name for tall plants that grow beside a dam or a lake somewhere. Or a creek. A reed can also be part of

a musical instrument, an oboe or clarinet. But Reed can be a name, too. I thought when he told me his name, he was telling me to read. Like, to read something. Of course I didn't see how it's spelt when he said it out loud that day. And I thought, Read what? But it's like this: Reed.

I like that word, too. It's got a long sound in the middle but a definite ending. Definite, but not defiant like paddock.

Sometimes I make a list of words. Of things to say, or just what I'm thinking. I can never think of the best thing to say when I'm in the middle of a conversation. Like when Amber gave everyone but me a piece of chewy, and I said that wasn't very nice, she's like, 'Don't make such a big deal of it, Lissa, it's only a piece of chewy.' I said, 'I'm not making a big deal of it,' and she smiled and said, 'Well look at you, you're almost crying.'

What I should have said was, 'I'm not upset about a piece of chewing gum, I'm upset because this is another small example of how you're a total B to me every day.'

You know what they call that? The wit of the staircase. It's like you think of the best thing to say when you're walking back down the staircase after an argument.

I always have that.

The wit of the staircase.

And sometimes, I have no words at all.

That was how it was when I met Reed.



Eliot says to me, 'Here, have Mercy.'
So I hold her.
And then I have to take her.

TUESDAY

MIST

That's a short word, but you can rest for a while on the 's' part. You can actually say that word for as long as you like.

Mist is a homophone, like reed – when the sound of the word has two meanings, but you spell it differently. Mist can also be missed. Like someone is missed, or missing.

So after dinner on Monday night, I'm putting rubbish in the bin around the side of our house, and I can just make out a shape, like a sheet covering something, up against the heating outlet under the old wooden awning. It's pretty dark, and the light around the side hasn't come on because it needs a new globe and that's the stuff Dad used to do. I know that's sexist and everything, but I'm stating a fact. Dad changed the light globes in our house. Dad mowed the lawn. Sure, he did cleaning and stuff, and he read to me when I was little. And Mum did gardening too, she just never mowed the lawn. But now she does.

Anyway, often there's stuff around the side – firewood, bags of compost, stakes for the garden up against the house like

leaning wooden soldiers. But this shape seems bigger, bulkier. Maybe Mum's bought something and she's hiding it from us. But it isn't anyone's birthday, and nowhere near Christmas. It's like the middle of June. And why hide it here?

It's misty and cold, I can feel water in the air, and I want to get back inside. I only see the shape out of the corner of my eye. I don't even think about it much.

The next morning, it's *really* cold, there's fog suspended everywhere so that the Dandenongs have disappeared. Sometimes it's so clear you can almost make out the individual trees on the mountain range, and sometimes it's a still, blue mass, like a painting. But this morning it's a filmy grey sheet and if I didn't know differently, anything could be at the horizon, not mountains at all. There's frost on the grass and I know the car windscreen will have ice on it and the wipers will make that scratching sound when Mum turns them on.

When I leave for school, I go around the side. The air's so cold it makes my eyes water. Steam is coming out of the vent at the heating outlet. Have you ever noticed that? When the heating's on inside, the unit lets out warm air from a vent outside, like a kettle boiling, or when you breathe out steam on a cold morning. But the lump that had been against the heating outlet the night before isn't there anymore.

Gone.

I wonder about telling Sadie when I get to school. But she's talking with Amber and the others, who are all rubbing their hands together in the pink fingerless gloves that they bought online at the same time. And I haven't made a list, so I don't

say anything. If I did say something, Amber would probably say some mean thing back. But of course I can't even think of what it would be. That's why I have the wit of the staircase, I can never think of what she'll say next.

I stand near them, stamping my feet and hugging myself against the cold.

I used to think that Amber let me hang around them because she likes my brother, Harry. Harry's in Year Eleven, he'd never be interested in her. But she always says, 'I'm like my mum, I go for older guys. Guys our age are so immature.' Amber does look older than she is, especially when we go out, because she wears her mum's shoes, and heaps of make-up.

Harry is good looking, I can see it. And he's muscly and strong because he plays footy. But he's never had a girlfriend, as far as I know. He's more into sport and he's also pretty clever so he studies quite a bit. Lots of girls like him, they're always telling me.

Amber will only come over to mine if she thinks Harry will be there. She used to talk about Harry all the time, but lately she seems to have stopped that. Thank god. It's embarrassing.

It was much better last year when Hana was here. She was, well, she still is, my best friend. In March, she moved back to Western Australia with her family. Mum used to tell me to branch out, have more friends. Maybe Mum knew that Hana would be moving one day. Her parents work in the mining industry and they come from WA. But Mum never said outright, Hana's family will be moving back to WA next year. When I told Mum, she said, 'Oh, really' but I got the feeling that she already knew. Her face didn't change, her eyes

didn't do that dancing thing that happens when you're actually surprised.

Hana likes words, same as me. That was our thing. We'd do the cryptic crosswords together. And the quick. And the target words. And sometimes the sudoku, although Harry or Mum usually had to help us with that.

A word that Hana taught me is kvetching. It means to complain loudly. Like, Harry is kvetching that there are never any bananas left. Hana hardly ever complains herself, but sometimes she says to people, 'Stop your kvetching!' And even if they don't know what it means, they usually shut up. Hana could handle the girls in our year much better than I can. She didn't really care what they said or did or thought.

Sadie's being nice to me today. We sit together at lunchtime, and after school we get on the train first and then when the other Year Eights get on, she doesn't go and sit with them like she sometimes does. I wonder why she stays with me today, but not yesterday and maybe not tomorrow. When I get off, I see her go over to them. Sadie likes it that I live close to the school, and closer to the city than she does. She can stay at my place if we're all going out somewhere, unless Amber invites her to stay at hers.

I walk home quickly from the station because it's still so cold. You know those days when it never warms up at all? It's not even four-thirty, but the sun's already going down and the cars have their headlights on. It's smoggy, and still. Smog makes such a soft light in the afternoon. Like a weak sunset.

Sometimes the smog worries me, makes me think of climate change, and that maybe in the future days will always look

like this. Like in China, there's terrible smog. My dad lives in China, in Beijing, but he says some days it's clear, some days the sky is as blue as when he was a kid growing up in the country back here.

Mum works till six or seven most nights at Move Australia. It's a physio and Pilates studio. They have classes there, and there's a hydrotherapy pool, and they see patients. The pool is so warm, Mum lets me go in it sometimes. I went there quite a bit after school when Hana first moved. Warm water makes everything feel better. When does a warm bath not feel good?

I'm just thinking that I might read my book for English in a warm bath as I reach the gate at the top of our driveway.

The lump is back. Is there an animal under the blanket?

I open the gate quietly, lifting the latch so that it doesn't click. I leave it open so it won't make a noise. I get closer, creeping down the side of the house.

The lump doesn't move.

I bend down to look.

Someone is in the blanket, asleep under the awning on our driveway.

I can't see who it is, or even if it's male or female, adult or child. Only a hoodie and a bit of face. I tiptoe straight past the sleeping person, up the three steps to the deck and the back door. My fingers feel frozen and I fumble to get my key from my wallet. I slide the glass door open, then lock it as soon as I get inside. I don't turn the light on, even though it's quite dark. Should I call the police? That might be over-reacting. My heart's beating fast. I stand very still and look out into our back garden. Bare trees, yellowing lawn. My hammock,

wet from the rain, hanging heavy to the grass. I don't want whoever is sleeping to wake up because then what will I do? Maybe it's a homeless person. How cold must it be for those poor people in winter?

I pace around the house, put the heater on, return to the back room. It's all glass out to the deck so I can see if anyone has entered the garden. No one there. In the last shaft of sunlight that cuts across the wooden floor, I see dust on Mum's wooden owls and on the photo frames with pictures of me and Harry when we were little. I decide to call Mum. We're only supposed to call her at work if it's an emergency, but I figure this is an emergency. I speed-dial Mum. Her phone rings. And rings. And rings. She has it set to ring forever before it goes to message bank. *Hello, you've called Fiona Freeman. Leave me a message, and I'll –*

There's a noise outside, on the steps, something moves.

I turn around.

He's standing on the deck.

A kid, maybe my age, or a bit younger. Thirteen? It's hard to tell because that grey hoodie is pulled down over his face. He wears round glasses, with thin steel frames.

There's only the sliding glass door between us. The blanket's in a bundle on the outdoor table behind him, and a backpack.

'What do you want?' I call. My voice trembles, croaky.

He's still, staring.

I hold up my phone. 'I'm calling my mum, now.'

His eyes crunch up, like he's worried, or even scared, like me.

'Then I'm calling the police.' Is he a burglar? Does he have a knife? If Mum were here she'd definitely call the police. I wish

Harry was here, but he's at footy training till seven. And I'm not sure he'd be any help, actually. What would Hana do?

My phone pings. I jump. I feel as if I have to keep looking at him because this will stop him from coming closer. 'What do you want?' I say again through the glass. I'm glad I locked that door. 'You can't come in. Go away! Go home!'

He turns to go. Oh thank god. He's leaving.

I look at Mum's text.

Did you call me? Got a client in 5. Having a quick drink with Troy after work. Home by 8. Soup in fridge you can heat up for dinner. Love you xxx

But Mum and I always have dinner together . . .

Hang on, he's not going, he's getting something from the blanket. His hood falls from his head like he's a monk, or someone from *Lord of the Rings*. I can see that he has a number two haircut, like in the army. He's quite small. Could I fight him? I don't think so, because I'm small too, for my age. He leans over into the bundle. What's he getting? A rock? A knife? A gun? I grip my phone. 'I'm going to -'

There's a noise – like a little animal or something, a little cry. What's he got?

The kid turns around.

He's holding a baby.



*His place makes me feel nervous. People half asleep on the stairs.
And his room's like a cupboard. He can't even fit a proper bed
there but he's still proud of it.*

*There's incense burning beside the mattress. Incense doesn't
make me calm, it makes me think a fire might start. And I know
that sometimes their friend Cathy takes some bad drug and they
have to take her up to the clinic or call the ambulance.*