

She hadn't wanted to come back.

Forcing a smile and a spring in her step was not something she needed to do very often and it felt all sorts of wrong trying to do it now. Happy was simply part of who she was. Life as an eternal optimist was fun. She was always the one to always look on the bright side, find the silver lining and see the hidden gem in any situation, no matter how diabolical. She did it for herself and she made a living doing it for others.

But here now, under the rule of another, that internal, eternal optimist had fallen silent. She felt like the bones of a grand ship, sunk years prior, lifeless on the ocean floor. A strange mixture of preservation and decay.

There was a time where she would have flat out refused. Dug in her heels and hollered until her dad came to settle things. But he was long gone and she was too old for hollering. Or at least so she had been told.

Contemplating this now from her own kitchen bench, the slogan from the 1980's dismal 'war on drugs' rammed its way into her thoughts. Just Say No! The reductionistic attitude that saw this campaign fail then was failing her here too. It's not a big No at the point of breakdown that's needed. It's a culmination of a thousand little no's that led up to that point. The sensical notions had fallen on deaf ears.

All the thousand little unsaid No's of her own life gathered closely around, unruly, jostling one another for her attention.

She felt desperate to escape the growing soundscape, irritatingly predictable and grating. Pulling on a brown woolen jumper replete with loose threads and holes in the seams, she stepped into a pair of worn and mud caked blundstone boots and marched defiantly out the door.

The determination she felt to leave the growing cacophony of regret meant the howling wind that wrapped itself around every strand of her hair, pushing and pulling in all directions and all at once, did not even register.

An obese body of grey hung low in the sky. Thick and full, the air itself was dripping. The sensation of breathing here helped her imagine what it would feel like to be drowning.

As if by clockwork, somewhere around the 2 km mark the complaints began to turn to contemplation and the contemplation soon made way for a more satisfying mental masturbation. Pointless yes, but at least stimulating enough to provide distraction from the lifetime of devastating mistakes that had led her to this point.

Being here, in this town, was perhaps as good an option of being anywhere, she pondered. She could have chosen here. In fact there was a time she did.

She laughed a little, savouring the memory. The bold decision to quit her studies. Her mother, eyes like thunder, threatening to cut her off, not just financially, but emotionally and physically. The words “if you don’t come home now then don’t bother coming at all” rang in her ears. Those words were from another time and place that she could not quite pinpoint. Was it her own memory or that of someone else's? Either way it was clearly understood in her family to toe the line or pay the price.

The intense willingness she felt to call her mothers bluff won that time. Operating under her own volition and moving to this very place without the blessing of the matriarch, was a bold move and perhaps a foolish one.

Her mother retracted her hollow threat and continued her own special version of loving support which created an intensified sense of worthlessness in those who received it. 2 parts suffocation, 1 part obligation. Succumbing to this was a recipe for the devastation she now faced.

The unspoken no's struck up their chorus again. Chaotic, rhythmless, tuneless droning.

She walked on. Rain began falling steadily, running down her face, collecting beneath her chin and onto the crimson collar peeping from beneath the disintegrating brown jumper, the bright colour hidden, but still capable of making itself known.

This place was one of great beauty. Having an eye for such had made it an obvious choice back then. Turning toward places and things of beauty had been part of her life's work. Beautifying places, spaces, and people. It seemed to her to be more enjoyable work than fixing the broken.

Adding embellishments to that which is already working. Giving voice to successes of others or the advancements of humanity. Acknowledging the inherent beauty in the natural world These came so easily. Another gift from her dad she thought, pressing on.

The wind crept in through the holes and poked its way up her sleeves. She looked up for the first time since leaving the house, having walked this path every day for the past year it was familiar enough. There was soft ground, springy underfoot and puddles were forming. Noticing that the edge of the forest was near and knowing the shelter it would provide, she turned toward it.

The thought of the protection of the forest was enough for a profound sense of relaxation to sweep through her system. The hormonal cascade followed moments later and thoughts changed again. She marvelled for a moment at the sensitivity of her own chemistry. A pharmacological phenomenon, she thought. A miraculous living breathing system that regulates, adjusts, tweaks and measures, all in perfect proportion. The inner landscape coming into alignment with the outer. Matching.

She felt at home in the forest. The eternal optimism was much more accessible. In fact, she marvelled, "I feel just as at home right here, at this moment as I ever would anywhere."

Wild wind and soggy air, she re-knew that home was not a place to come too. Home was herself. She re-knew that she no longer needed to come home because she already was home. With a sigh she turned to walk back to her dwelling, no longer a place of painful attachment, something to fix. Rather a simple reflection of herself. And one that she could change as she pleased.

No sunshine. No rainbow. No longer the stranger. Not to herself nor to the place she had come back too.