The Last of Its Kind

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The animal came to town on the same day Mr. Nevus started eating himself to death. The same day we were supposed to talk. It was one of those long-teeth-big-feet animals from the outback, like the one that got its nose caught under the back fence two years ago. You pried it out with one end of the broom and shooed it away with the other. It was mid-December, and there was an Indian Ocean breeze. I really loved you, that day.

But this animal was different. It had the most desolate look I’ve ever seen—the look of an animal about to go extinct. The last of its kind; not a similar soul left in existence. You know that look. You saw it on your dad’s face when the doctor told him he couldn’t drive anymore. This animal had that kind of face as it walked out of the rainforest and into town.

I was in the hairdresser’s, sitting by the front window. I had this theory that if I got my highlights just right then I would know exactly what I needed to say to you. And if I said something wrong—something that made you pull back your hand and get that faraway look in your eyes, like you were already leaving me—I could blame it on the stylist, who looked about sixteen and was on work experience. She probably hadn’t covered Cutting Hair to Save Relationships yet.

While the stylist—her name was Amy but she was going to change it to Tania as soon as she was eighteen—was trying to find a pair of scissors, I saw the animal walk in on the main road. It was going dead straight down the white line, like a car across the Nullarbor Plain. Like it had an appointment. It was heading for the old clock-tower near the pub, where you told me once how you don’t like the way my cheeks go red when I drink. Amy/Tania made her first tentative snip just above my left ear and said, “Haven’t seen one of those in a while.”
The animal had just left my line of sight when Mr. Nevus drove up in his vomit-green Holden and pulled into the parking lot at Buncle Burger (the sign was supposed to read Uncle Burger, but a stray ‘B’ had wandered onto the template somewhere between the restaurant and the sign-writer down the street). You remember Buncle Burger. We had a fight in the parking lot last April because you wanted to get take-away and I wanted to eat in. You ended up walking home alone with a bag of French fries while I sat at the counter and sobbed into my soft serve.

Mr. Nevus got out of the car and shuffled into the restaurant. His wife was sitting in the front passenger seat. I could see the glint of her compact mirror when she pulled it out to check her foundation. She always wore heavy make-up; she had a birthmark the shape of a swastika on her right cheek. But if you got over that idea, Mrs. Nevus was beautiful. Small and blonde, with big eyes, and a nice smile. And she was young. Much younger than Mr. Nevus, who by that point must have been getting close to sixty. Nobody in town could work out how the two of them had ended up living so happily ever after. People wanted to call Mrs. Nevus a gold-digger, but Mr. Nevus had no money. He was a high school maths teacher with no good investments or wealthy relatives. He wasn’t very attractive, either. Not one of those people you have to look away from if you’re sitting opposite them on a bus, but not someone you’d want to stare at for the rest of your life, either.

When Mrs. Nevus was satisfied her face was free of the Third Reich, she got out of the car and followed her husband into Buncle Burger. This wouldn’t have been odd if it weren’t for the fact that Mr. Nevus had been diagnosed four years ago with type 2 diabetes. If it weren’t for the fact that he had been on daily insulin injections for a year. If it weren’t for the fact that ever since that fateful doctor’s visit Mr. Nevus had been on a strict diet, overseen by Mrs. Nevus. No bacon, no birthday cake, and definitely no Buncle Burger.

Amy/Tania had begun shaping one side of my fringe into a style reminiscent of an accident with a circular saw. Meanwhile, the animal had reached the clock-tower, where it gave Mr. Lisbon—head
of the Returned and Services League—the fright of his life by plonking itself down by the Anzac Day veterans’ wreaths. We’ve all seen animals before, of course. Living on the edge of the rainforest like we do, it’s often hard to avoid them. But I’d never seen an animal quite like this. It was big—bigger than a puma and broader at the shoulders—but this was an animal that was coming apart. We’re used to seeing much more impressive specimens, like the ones that come sniffing around your cucumber vines in summer; shiny creatures with muscled haunches and sleek fur. This animal had warts on its chin and one of its eyes was larger than the other and a bit lazy. Its fur was a dull, sheen-less grey, its teeth an unbrushed yellow. Its stomach sagged; its ears were flea-bitten. The only impressive thing about this animal was its wail.

Right there, beneath the commemorative clock, the animal let out a cry that bounced all over town. I heard it in the hairdresser’s. Mr. and Mrs. Nevus heard it over at Buncle Burger. The sound was long and low and sad. You’ve heard it before. You heard it when your mum found out your dad wasn’t coming back. You heard it when your grandfather was standing by the coffin at your grandmother’s funeral. It was that sort of wail.

People tried to ignore it at first. Just went on with working and shopping and eating and haircutting. But the wail was persistent and ear-itching, like a car alarm. Eventually people let their lives be interrupted and went to look at the animal.

Except the Nevuses. By then Mr. Nevus was on his fifth cheeseburger, standing by the counter, wrappers around his feet. He lifted the top of the bun and peeled off the pickle—that little green imperfection—and placed it on the counter neatly, beside four others. Mrs Nevus was beside him, begging him to stop. His blood sugar was rising sharply—he was woozy, and his vision was starting to blur. He could feel the beginnings of pins and needles in his extremities. Mr. Nevus finished the burger in four bites, and then ordered another.

I didn’t see any of this—I had run down the street with my hair half cut to stand in front of the clock-tower—but Mrs. Nevus
told me later. “It was like a car accident,” she said. “Like seeing blood and guts on the highway. I couldn’t look away, but I couldn’t make him stop.”

While Mrs. Nevus was watching her husband eat, I was watching the animal cry. Its gums shivered. It wailed with its eyes open, which seemed unnatural. I wanted to close them, to pass my palm gently over its face the way police do with murder victims in those crime shows you watch and I can’t stand.

We all had better places to be. You know I did. And I promise that the whole time, in the back of my mind, there you were. But at that moment I just couldn’t look away. None of us could.

The animal had gotten well into a blood-curdling rhythm when Mrs. Nevus ran into our midst. She had a wail of her own. She stood right in front of the animal as if it wasn’t there, and said, “He’s going to kill himself.”

She was crying and her foundation was starting to run. Her birthmark emerged slowly from beneath rivers of makeup. Mrs. Nevus didn’t care. She was staring at us imploringly. The animal had stopped wailing and was looking at Mrs. Nevus as if she had just stolen its thunder. A stiff silence hung across town that was almost louder than the wail.

The animal started to attack.

It went for Mrs. Nevus first; lunged down the steps and dug its teeth into her thigh. It left her groaning on the bottom step and made its way into the crowd. The animal was old and slow and no kind of fighter, but we were frozen with shock for the first few seconds and were easy targets. It got Mrs. Chilblain’s son next; the boy with the lisp. Scratched him right down his middle with its rust-coloured claws. By the time it had bitten off old Mr. Ginnevan’s left pinkie finger we had started to move. People at the back of the crowd made it into the supermarket and someone had the smarts to turn off the automatic doors. A few others made a break for the real estate agent’s. I grabbed Mrs. Nevus—since it looked like nobody else was going to—and we hobbled into the dentist’s across the street.
The animal was slow and barely managed to snap at the heel of my shoe as I made it through the door. We watched it pace the street. It was breathing heavily and it dribbled as it walked, leaving a trail of spit on the asphalt. Its yellow eyes were cloudy. We stood behind glass, trying to understand what had made this animal so worn.

Up at Buncle Burger Mr. Nevus had just finished his twenty-fifth cheeseburger and was on the edge of a diabetic coma. He had relocated to a booth, where he could lie down while he brought the meat and bread to his mouth and chewed and swallowed. He was eating with his eyes closed—most of the world was obscured by a thick fog, anyway. It was Saturday and the two teenage boys on shift were having a discussion about what they should do about Mr. Nevus’s situation. It went something like this:

“Is he okay?”
“He doesn’t look okay.”
“He probably shouldn’t be eating so many cheeseburgers.”
“Probably not.”
“Is it illegal?”
“To eat so many burgers? I don’t think so.”
“Should we stop him?”

It was this question that stumped the boys for some time, facing as they were their first moral quandary. Both agreed that it would be disastrous to make the wrong decision. So they made half a decision.

“Sir,” one of the boys said, approaching the booth Mr. Nevus had nominated as his deathbed. “We suggest,” the boy went on, “that you don’t eat any more cheeseburgers.”

“But,” the second boy stepped up quickly, “we won’t refuse to sell them to you. If that’s what you want.”

There was a long pause, during which the boys fervently hoped Mr. Nevus would make the right decision for them. In fact, Mr. Nevus had already decided. He had decided two days ago, when he was at his niece’s first birthday party and couldn’t have any cake. Mr. Nevus had never really liked cake—never lingered in
front of cabinets in cafés before, never spent Saturday afternoons Googling recipes for gateaux. Until now. Now food was on his mind constantly. He was conscious of the fact that it was silly to kill oneself over a piece of chocolate sponge. Or white-bread burger buns, for that matter. But he was going to do it anyway.

“Another cheeseburger, please,” he whispered, and slid his credit card onto the table. The boys looked at each other. Both of them had an unfamiliar heavy feeling in their guts. You know that feeling. You felt it when you fed that leftover chicken burrito to Whiskers and he was sick for a week. You also felt it when you told me you were attracted to Daisy from the post office. I know you did.

So the boys went back to the grill. Because once you feel that feeling for the first time and it settles in your stomach, it seems impossible to shift. It grows in you, like grey hair or varicose veins.

As Mr. Nevus began to chow down on his twenty-sixth cheeseburger—his heart beating as fast as a racehorse on speed—Mrs. Nevus and I were watching the animal stalk up and down the main street, searching for someone to maul. It pawed at windows where people had their faces pressed against the glass, as if it was begging for someone to let it in. After a while it seemed to come to the conclusion that none of us were coming out to be bitten. It turned and prowled towards Buncle Burger.

“Denny…” Mrs. Nevus whispered from beside a display case of dentures. Denny was Mr. Nevus’s first name. It was supposed to be Danny, but Mr. Nevus’s father had a speech impediment and could never pronounce the ‘a’ properly. And now the animal was heading right for Denny, lying bloated and woozy in the back booth at Buncle Burger.

I promise that, this whole time, even when I told Mrs. Nevus I would help her rescue Denny, I was thinking of you.

By the time we reached the parking lot the animal was already inside. It had the two teenage boys huddled together on top of the counter and was jumping at them feebly. It snarled and snapped but there was no way its old legs were going to propel it onto the
bench. After a while it turned and sniffed, and what was left of its sense of smell led it to the back of the restaurant.

Mr. Nevus was lying down with his eyes closed when the animal approached. On the table beside him was a line of burger wrappers weighted down with drooping pickles. He was breathing heavily, drawing each breath as if he was lifting a heavy stone. His hands were lying limp on his stomach, his fingers greasy. The animal rounded the corner and stopped. Mrs. Nevus and I stopped as well, at a distance. I looked around for something to hit the animal with. All the chairs were bolted to the floor. All the mops and brooms were, I assumed, out back somewhere behind the quivering adolescents. The only thing that was large and lift-able was a life-sized cardboard cut-out of Uncle Burger, the restaurant mascot. Uncle Burger is a cowboy with a cheeseburger head and French fry pistols. Not an ideal weapon, but it would do.

The animal had curled itself into its hind legs, like a runner crouched at a starting line. It was eyeing Mr. Nevus’s rapidly moving chest. Its face was full of hurt, full of whatever had happened to it out there in the rainforest. Perhaps its father had abused it. Maybe its mother hadn’t paid it enough attention. Perhaps it just couldn’t, after a long lifetime of trying, figure out how to be good enough.

All of this filled the animal up like a hormone as it prepared to attack. I gripped Uncle Burger; his cardboard elbows cut into my palms. At the last second—as the animal’s blunt claws rattled like marbles on the tiles—Mr. Nevus opened his eyes.

“Hey,” he whispered, his pupils swimming in clouds of sugar. “Nice doggie.”

Mr. Nevus stretched out a hand towards the animal.

The animal growled, and sniffed.

“What a nice doggie.” Mr. Nevus’s voice was soft and far away. He ran the tip of his finger across the animal’s matted left ear.

The animal clenched its teeth and prepared to chow down on Mr. Nevus’s hand, followed by his wrist and presumably the rest of his glucose-brimming person. Mrs. Nevus gripped my arm. I raised Uncle Burger above my head.
Then the animal noticed the pickles. Twenty-six of them. A smorgasbord of vinegar-soaked cucumbers on the table beside Mr. Nevus; left out like an offering.

The animal sniffed the pickles and then looked back at Mr. Nevus.

The animal melted. Its muscles collapsed, its hackles flattened out. It became soft and supine, and snuggled its body under Mr. Nevus’s arm as it began to slurp up the neglected pickles, one at a time.

“Good dog,” Mr. Nevus crooned. “What a good dog.”

The animal was making a sort of purring noise. I lowered Uncle Burger to the ground. Mrs. Nevus let out a sigh, like a geyser, and Mr. Nevus looked up.

“What’s that on your face, love?” he said. “Looks Buddhist. How beautiful.”

Mr. and Mrs. Nevus and their animal went to the hospital, where Mr. Nevus had six bags of saline pumped into him, and the animal had a few more cucumbers. I went to your place with half a haircut and a bottle of wine. By then you were already gone. I read the note you left, the one you slid under that gnome with the broken hand that sits by the front door. You spelled my name wrong, but I didn’t care. I was ready to make one whole decision.

I sat down to wait.