

My brother lives in Banff

Summer of 2003. I'm furious because I'm going to Disneyland and I've only just learned how awesome it is to get fingered. My parents don't seem to understand that I'm in love and it's really important that I stay in Wagga this summer and also that I get a tattoo on my back that says 'La Vie Bohème'. I've just done *RENT* at the local community theatre. I'm a grown-up. I've kissed two girls and two boys and I've recently taken a lover. He plays bass guitar. I buy the Bass Players Do It With Rhythm t-shirt from Supré. Nobody understands me!

Mum, Dad, Sooze and I are going on our first family overseas trip. We're going to California and then on to Canada. My brother Paul lives in Banff, a town built for tourists who want the Canada they've seen in a snow globe. Every house there is a log cabin and the bins have been bear-proofed. A ski town. Rich tourists and holiday workers. It's absolutely stunning and profoundly sad. My brother promised me we would see elk on the front lawn in the mornings, but so far we haven't.

My Brother's Ashes are in a Sandwich Bag

Paul lives in a house with some mates and his girlfriend, Andrea. She is Canadian, but she's not from Banff. She says the town she's from is so cold nobody leaves the house during winter. The schools get shut down. Most of her family has never seen the ocean. She and my brother have travelled the world on a dime. They met by chance in a taxi in Turkey or on a mountain in India or in a backyard in Ireland. This is their most recent landing spot. They are so happy. They have each had a go of sadness. My brother was left at the altar a few years before this, and Andrea's last boyfriend died in a light plane accident. Both of them were sadder than the other travellers they had met, and maybe that's why they saw each other clearly.

In 2013, my brother and Andrea stand on a beach in Newcastle. My brother loves this beach. It looks like a Britney Spears video with its jagged rocks and cliff faces and white sand. My nephews have found a crab and we're going to go look at it for a few hours. I'm happy here because I have always looked up to my brother and however he feels about something is how I feel. The things I think are mine are actually all his: Irish music, comedy, the border of crying, laughing and singing.

He loves it here and this beach is his. My brother and Andrea have moved to Newcastle because, even in 2013, Sydney is unaffordable, especially with their two kids: Noah and Finn. Noah is tanned like his father, Finn is pale. He is the image of his Polish-Canadian mother. They never meant to settle down. Noah was an accident and then they just sort of leaned in. They have a two-storey house and a bungalow out the back for the boys to smoke weed in when they get old enough.

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Now it's full of guitars and travel photos from a life that is on pause. A life they'll come back to once these two gremlins are eighteen.

Back in Banff, 2005. We pile into a car to see Lake Louise. It's beautiful in real life. The glassiest blue. We go for walks in the mountains. At six we're a big enough group that we aren't breaking the rules. You have to be in a group of four or more to hike in bear country – the idea is that if the bears think they can't take all of you, they are less likely to attack you. We sing. A lot. My brother and I, anyway. And it's good to let the bears know you're here and that you've got a high C. Dad interrupts our singing, 'Well, hello, long, tall Sally!' We turn around and see he is talking to a moose.

That night we go to the bottle shop and my brother asks what I drink. I'm only fifteen, so I don't really know. Usually it's whisky that I steal from the cabinet. If Mum lets me, I'll have two guava Cruisers, or vodka mudslides if I'm feeling adventurous. He buys me two Smirnoff Double Blacks. I can still taste the sugar coating my teeth. A taste of adulthood.

My brother has a big plan for our final day in Canada. Mum, Dad, my sister, my brother and I pile into a special bus with enormous tyres and head out onto the Columbia Icefield. We're standing on the biggest glacier in Canada. It's stunning. I even stop wishing I was back in Wagga getting fingered and preparing for Battle of the Bands. The guide says we can drink from the little pools of water, but please don't fill up our drink bottles. The water is cold. My brother gives me his gloves because I drop mine in a pool. The guide tells us the ice is melting because of something called 'global warming', that we have to do something about it, but it's 2005 so it doesn't feel

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real yet. My brother and I wander off from the group. He tells me he likes the song I recorded and sent to him. He loves all of my songs, even though they aren't good. I ask him if he's happy now – because his heart had been broken and he had never said it was fixed. He says he is. He is happy. He likes visiting the ice because it reminds him that, even when things look enormous, they are quietly melting away faster than we think.

We wander back to the rest of our family. My sister is complaining that it's cold, but she does that everywhere so the glacier isn't any real surprise. We both run cold. Dad is cold too though, and that's a surprise. He's never cold. We ask the guide to take a photo of us and he snaps a blurry one. We're standing, arms around each other, in big jackets, smiling in the sun in Canada on a big block of melting ice.

I wake up early the next morning ready to fly home and, as I sit on the icy balcony in the sun, I see the elk my brother promised staring up at me from the front lawn. Then I see my dad wander out the front door and very confidently feed the elk a waffle. Dad feeds the magpies back in Australia, so I guess he figured this was the same. In London once he tried to give a sandwich to one of those long-hat men out the front of the Queen's house.

2015. We're back on my brother's favourite beach. All of us except Dad. It's a shame he isn't here, because he loves beaches, but he never met this one. My brother says he feels a bit sick, that the medication feels different to before. He can't shake the feeling that something is in his hands, that he is holding something invisible. He hallucinates a threat and tries to fight it off to protect his family, but he is frail now.

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He is thin and bald. He's been bald since he was twenty, but it used to be in a Vincent Diesel way, and now . . .

Things can look enormous on the surface, but underneath they are melting away faster than we can see.

The threat disappears, but my brother still feels like there is something in his hands. Mum puts her hand in his. So that he has something to hold. My nephews watch. Finn doesn't react – he's found a crab, Noah is old enough to be afraid.

It's night now and my brother can't get warm. It's summer, but he's sleeping in jumpers and socks. Andrea finds him up in the middle of the night packing a bag. He is packing because his flight is soon and he has to get everything ready. He packs a bag for Ireland and Canada, for the icefield; he packs a bag for the boys, too, because once they get to Canada they will need to have enough people to keep away the bears. Andrea hands him his Guinness t-shirt and packs herself a bag for an overseas trip. She is a nurse and she knows it will be too scary if she calls him an ambulance, so she packs. She puts him in the car and tells him they are off to the airport. When they get to the hospital, they run tests. The chemo combined with the trial drug he was on have overwhelmed his system. The amount needed to keep him alive is turning out to be the same amount required to kill him. So no more fighting.

We didn't know that day on the ice would be the last day all five of us were together. We took one photo that day. We would have taken so many more, but we didn't know. We couldn't see it was melting.

Now there is just us left: my sister, my mother and me. Not a group big enough to hike near bears. So we collect new people, inspect them for melting ice, teach them our songs, and we hike on, singing.