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For my sister, Jo

Content Warning

This book contains mature themes, violence, explicit scenes and point-of-view depictions of trauma and psychological distress. Reader discretion is advised.

Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.
Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

SEPTEMBER 2000

SHELLEY

The bus was still twenty minutes out of Troubridge when Shelley felt a warm blot between her thighs. She'd been dozing, forehead resting against the window as Killing Heidi's *Reflector* played on her Discman, but now she sat straighter, her heart drumming a panicked *not-now, not-now, not-now*. Her period wasn't due for another week and she didn't have anything with her. Not even a jumper to tie around her waist. Outside, the landscape had flattened to alien terrain. Pink sand, milky salt pans and rust-hued shrubs beaten low beneath an acid-washed sky. She crossed her legs, willing her body to contain itself until she could slip to the loos when they stopped for lunch.

Agreeing to go on Year Eleven Retreat had been a mistake. Two-and-a-half hours into the trip, and her new classmates had picked over the weekend's gossip and finished the quizzes in that month's *Dolly* magazine. Now the air was stuffy with their boredom. To Shelley it felt like a noxious gas, waiting for a spark. Prickly heat spread across her skin and the first stirrings of cramp ached deep in her abdomen. She should have pulled a sickie. Broken an arm or a leg – the pain couldn't be worse than two nights in a ghost town with twenty-six strangers and minimal adult supervision.

At her old school, Retreat, or 'camp' in the common tongue, was a week with her whole year level sleeping on the gym floor of the Mt Stirling community centre. They ate soggy tomato and cheese sandwiches and did a high ropes course, archery and orienteering. Posh schools, Shelley was learning, had less-conventional ideas. St Augustine's took its Year Elevens, one form group at a time, to Baynton, an abandoned mining town secreted in the heart of Chalky Flats National Park at the foot of the Sturt Peninsula – a four-hour drive from the city. Students were billeted to the miners' former lodgings and expected to cook and fend for themselves. It was supposed to be an exercise in independence. An opportunity for peer bonding, spiritual enrichment and self-reflection before they embarked (the school's word, not Shelley's) on their final year. In a nutshell, it was *The Lord of the Flies* waiting to happen.

But Shelley's mum, who had not set foot in a high school in the past quarter-century, saw Retreat as the perfect opportunity for Shelley to make friends before she officially started at St Augustine's next term. She was *lucky*, her mother had reminded her at drop off, that St Augustine's was willing to accept her so late in the year and should be *thankful* that her grandparents had agreed to help with the fees. God, she was never going to hear the end of how much it was costing to send her to a place she had no desire to be. But her parents had shut down Shelley's suggestion of home-schooling, and nowhere else would take her at such short notice – not after what had happened at her old school.

When the bus pulled into the Troubridge recreation grounds, Shelley's underwear felt sodden and she was certain there'd be a stain on the seat of her cargo pants when she stood up. She decided the best way to avoid becoming a 'How Embarrassment' feature in next month's *Dolly* was to stay put until her new classmates left, then make a dash for the bathrooms. She made slow business of hunting for something in her backpack and had almost convinced herself that she had the situation under control, when a boy in a backwards Crows cap from the row behind poked her on the shoulder.

'You moving or not?'

'Oh, um, no. I –'

'Everyone off, and be quick about it!' bellowed Mr Wallace, one of their two supervising teachers. He wore wire-framed glasses straight out of the eighties and a put-upon expression, as though being around teenagers and their antics gave him a permanent headache. He stuck his head back through the door and saw Shelley still sitting down. 'That includes you, Ms Martin. Stretch your legs! Get the blood flowing!'

If only he knew.

The boy widened his eyes at Shelley: *What are you waiting for?*

Shit.

She took a deep breath as she stood up and tried to angle her backpack off one shoulder to cover her bum as she started down the aisle. Maybe her flow wasn't as heavy as she thought. Maybe nobody would notice. After all, someone would need to be *looking*, checking her out, to see –

'Ugh, gross! New girl's arse is a crime scene.'

There was a whooshing in Shelley's ears and her body became a pillar of flame as twenty-six pairs of eyes strained to get a view of her backside. Girls looked mortified on her behalf, turning away to whisper behind their hands. A few of the boys made disgusted vomit sounds. Someone guffawed. Shelley willed herself not to cry.

'What the fuck is wrong with you?'

Darkness furred the edges of Shelley's vision and she dug her fingers into the seat ahead to keep herself upright. This was a disaster. She'd been naive to imagine it could be any different. But when she summoned the courage to turn and face her accuser, she saw that the girl who had spoken was standing up from the double seat she had to herself to glare at the boy in the Crows cap. She was short and athletic in track pants and a St Augustine's rugby jumper, her swing of dark hair pulled into a high ponytail and her eyes narrowed to blades. 'Why are you staring at her arse, Kyle?'

'She's *bleeding*.' He made it sound like a criminal offence.

The girl rolled her eyes. 'It's not blood: it's uterine lining. And it's not going to hurt you.'

Shelley felt her soul leave her body. She was dead. Salt and burn her bones, there was no coming back from this.

At least Kyle had turned his sights on the other girl.

'I forgot. This shit's your jam.' He waggled his tongue through the V of his fingers. 'Finger lickin' good, ay, Mack?'

A trio of his friends in oversized T-shirts and footy jerseys laughed as though this were the put-down of the year.

The girl gave him a sweet, dangerous smile. 'Comments like that are the reason you'll never find out, *Kyle*.'

Mr Wallace poked his head back through the door a second time. 'What's the hold-up here, folks?'

'Mack and the new girl are giving us an anatomy lesson,' Kyle said with a smirk.

Mack regarded him with pure venom.

Shelley willed herself into dust.

'Well, they can continue outside. And turn that frown upside down, Ms Whitmore. No sour grapes on my bus. Go eat your lunch and get some air. We roll again in fifteen minutes.'

Alone in the girls' loos, Shelley locked herself in one of the stalls and felt the last of her resolve give way. The tears she'd been holding back escaped in noisy sobs as she struggled to wind a wad of toilet paper around the crotch of her knickers to tide her over until she could access the emergency pads in her duffel. She was still hiccupping – still trying to pull herself together enough to unlock the door, splash water on her face and command her legs to carry her back across the car park to face her new classmates – when the outside door opened and sneakered footsteps echoed across the concrete.

'Shelley?'

She recognised Mack's voice from the bus.

Go away, go away, go away, she willed.

'You in here?' A light brown fist appeared beneath the stall door and uncurled in a flash of electric blue nail polish to offer a tampon. 'My cycle's unpredictable too. I figured you might need this.'

Shelley muttered her thanks and hoped Mack would leave her in peace, but she was still leaning against the wall by the paper-towel dispenser when Shelley emerged to wash her hands.

'You didn't need to wait for me.'

'I wanted to. Kyle served up a real arsehole's welcome back there. You okay?' Mack asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Shelley dared a glance at her reflection in the rust-freckled mirror. Her face was still blotchy and flushed with shame and her eyes were red-rimmed.

'I was hoping to avoid the whole "crying in the toilets on my first day" cliché, but I'll survive.' She gave Mack a rueful smile. 'Thanks for sticking up for me.'

'Any excuse to take Kyle Lynton and his cronies down a notch.' Mack stuck out her hand. A handmade bracelet of rainbow beads glinted on her wrist. 'Mack Whitmore.'

'Shelley.'

'Shelley Martin – I know. You're bunking with me, Raffi and Priya in Overseer's Lodge.' Mack looked sheepish. 'We were supposed to introduce ourselves before we left, but I guess we missed you?'

Shelley felt a guilty twinge. After everything that had happened at Belair High, her goal at St Augustine's was to be wallpaper. She wasn't there to make friends, or an impression of any kind. When her mum dropped her at the gates that morning, she'd made a beeline for the bus and secured a free double seat where she slouched low with her

headphones on, her backpack blocking the seat beside her, and a book open in her lap for good measure. Only, as it turned out, her body had other plans.

'Here, tie this around your waist.' Mack pulled off her jumper and offered it to Shelley. 'I feel semi-responsible for what happened back there.'

'Thanks, but it's not your fault,' Shelley assured her. 'The boys at my old school were just as bad.'

Slut. Witch. Filthy whore. The old taunts cut fresh wounds.

'You were at Belair High, right?'

Shelley's mouth went dry and a migraine triggered behind her right eye, making her vision pulse red.

'I don't mean to stickybeak. It's just Ms Lim mentioned it and I, uh . . .' Mack lowered her voice. 'I read in the paper about the boy who died. I'm really sorry. It must have been awful.'

Leaves stuck to the blood on her hands and her white shirt soaked crimson. Her feet slipping on fallen pine needles as she ran through the trees . . . Shelley shut her eyes, trying to block the memory.

'It was an accident,' she muttered, realising a beat too late that Mack hadn't asked. Misadventure: that was the coroner's official finding.

'Were you close?' Mack pressed.

Matthew's fingertips smoothed her hair behind her ear and his breath was warm against her cheek. 'You're so beautiful, Shelley.'

She shook her head. 'He was in the year above.' True, but a splinter of the whole.

'One minute, Saints!' Mr Wallace bellowed from the car park. 'The bus leaves in *one minute*!'

Mack rolled her eyes. 'We're summoned. Sit with me the rest of the way?'

Shelley would've preferred to space out listening to her music for the remainder of the trip, or better yet, hide in the loos until the bus left, but Mack didn't seem prepared to take no for an answer.

'Sure,' she agreed, already panicking over what they'd find to talk about for the next hour. 'Give me a minute. I'll catch up.'

Mack squeezed her arm, misreading her apprehension. 'Don't worry about Kyle; everyone knows he's a waste of space. And whatever happened at your old school, it's ancient history. You're a Saint now.'

Shelley tried for a smile as she watched her leave and wondered whether Mack would have been so quick to stick up for her had she known the truth.

Alone again, she lifted her gaze to the mirror and met the dark wells of a dead boy's blinded gaze.

'Matthew?'

His name was a ghosting kiss. Blood on her tongue.

Shelley wanted to believe she was imagining things. That she had left him and the damaged parts of herself in the trees at Weemala Reserve on that hellish afternoon.

And that St Augustine's would be a fresh start. But his image lingered when she closed her eyes, and her period, heavy and out of sync, felt like a bad omen; the horror she held within seeping through.

Margot McGovern lives in Adelaide and has a creative writing PhD from Flinders University. Her debut novel, *Neverland*, was shortlisted for the Text Prize and the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, and her short horror fiction has appeared in issues of *The Dark* and the Aurealis-Award-shortlisted anthology *Hometown Haunts: #LoveOzYA Horror Tales*. You can find Margot on Instagram: @margot.mcgovern