THE PINES

by Jackson Freud

EXT. RIVERBANK - DAY

EMILY (26) and DAMIEN (28) stroll beside the flowing river, hand-in-hand. Both are wrapped in parkas and scarves. A shroud of mist encircles the young couple and drifts across the surface of the water.

DAMIEN

How about pizza? We could order from Angelo’s.

EMILY

In case you forgot, the wedding’s in three weeks, Damo. Three.

Don’t be a jerk.

DAMIEN

I’m just kidding. Lighten up.

Emily drops Damien’s hand.

EMILY

Wouldn’t that be nice? How about you try being the bride for a day and see how easy it is to lighten up, huh?

She marches to the river’s edge. She folds her arms across her chest and stares out at the sea of fog. Damien moves towards her,cautiously. It’s obvious he has been here before. The fabled Doghouse. He places his hands on the back of her shoulders. Emily tenses for a moment, then relents.

DAMIEN

I’m sorry, Em. I know you’re under a lot of pressure at the moment.

EMILY

No shit, Sherlock.

I’m sorry. It’s just... one minute we’re at the pub, flirting and sharing cigarettes, and now it’s suddenly seating arrangements and floral arrangements and fucking everything arrangements.

DAMIEN

Babe--

EMILY

And if I have to sample one more wedding cake or look at another reception menu-- You know, sometimes I wish...

DAMIEN

What?

Emily sighs.

EMILY

It’s nothing. I’m just stressed out, okay?

DAMIEN

You sure?

EMILY

Well, I guess there is one thing.

Damien raises his eyebrows, concerned.

EMILY

I really hate Angelo’s Pizza.

They both burst out laughing.

EXT. STATE PARK - JOGGING TRAIL - DAY

Emily is powering along the track in a singlet and shorts. Her earbuds are on, iPhone blasting a POP TRACK at a deafening pitch. The sun is beginning to sink behind the Eucalypts and Silver Wattles lining the path. Emily’s iPhone starts RINGING, fading out the music in her ears. Emily stops, checks the display screen.

ON SCREEN

“DAMIEN”

BACK TO SCENE

Emily’s thumb hovers over the slide bar. Instead of answering, she waits for the call to ring out, then takes off at a sprint, running faster and faster.

EXT. STATE PARK - JOGGING TRAIL - NIGHT

The sun has vanished now. Emily’s face is red, streaked with sweat. Clumps of hair cling to her cheeks. She’s still running though, as if in a trance. Driven by unseen demons. The music blasting from the iPhone suddenly cuts out, bringing Emily to a grinding halt. She glances at the display screen. Dead.

EMILY

Shit.

She clicks the central button a couple of times.

EMILY (CONT’D)

Come on, don’t do this. Don’t do this, you piece of crap!

Her shouts drive a FLOCK OF GALAHS out of a nearby tree. They disperse into the night, wailing. Brought back to reality, Emily peers through the mist at the dark trail ahead. The path is forked and unmarked. A confused expression crosses her face.

The noise of BOOTS ON GRAVEL cut through the silence, followed by cheerful whistling. It’s “The Teddy Bears’ Picnic.” Like a ghost,

TED BRACKEN (40s) materialises out of the gloom behind Emily. He is a bearded bear in bushman’s attire. Though weatherworn, his round face is kind. When he notices Emily, the whistling dies on his lips.

TED

Evening.

EMILY

Evening.

TED

You alright, sweetheart? Not a good idea to be out here all alone, at this time of night.

EMILY

I’m fine, thank you.

TED

Are you lost?

EMILY

No.

TED

It’s easy to lose yourself in all this... serenity. I know that much.

Emily can’t help but smile.

EMILY

I guess maybe I am a little lost. I was so caught up in my music. Now I have no idea which path takes me home.

Ted removes his hat and scratches his balding head.

TED

You’re new to the area, aren’t you, sweetheart?

EMILY

What makes you say that?

TED

I know this trail like the back of my hand. The people on it, too. This is the first time I’ve seen you come along.

Emily smiles again but she seems uncomfortable now.

EMILY

Just moved out here to be with my fiancee.

TED

Congratulations.

EMILY

Thanks. Speaking of, I should probably be getting home to him now before he starts putting together a search party or something.

Ted throws back his head and lets out a deep, guttural laugh.

TED

Search party. I like that.

A cold breeze blows through the trees, rustles Emily’s hair. She wraps her arms around her chest and shivers.

EMILY

Could you tell me which path to take to get back to Jumping Creek Road?

Ted claps his hand against his forehead.

TED

Where are my manners? Of course. Take the right path and follow it all the way up to a sign that says “Koala Korner.” Once there, veer right and you’re home free.

EMILY

Great. Thanks so much, ah...?

TED

Ted.

EMILY

Emily. Thanks, Ted.

TED

No problem at all, Emily. And congratulations again. Your fiancee’s a lucky man.

EMILY

He is.

Emily crosses to the right fork and looks back over her shoulder at the bearded bushman.

TED

Don’t forget, “Koala Korner.”

EMILY

Got it.

She jogs off down the path.