

Kahli Scott

we are here to play the game, the one Dustan told me about long ago in January. Maybe if January didn't depress me so much, with its burning mornings and suicidal afternoons, I wouldn't have been in Dustan's shop that day, revelling in the cold, silver dust.

But I was. And for that reason, I want to kiss January right on the lips, pick her up and spin her round and round and tell her thank you for leading me to this moment, to this hill, to right now.

‘You look impaled,’ Dustan said as I walked into the shop. ‘Impaled, but still breathing slightly.’

‘I’m impaled by nothing but the injustices of life, Dustan,’ was my reply. I sneezed. Dustan was immune to the dust that surrounded him, mainly because he sat in it all day but partly because it was the first part of his name. It was embedded in him.

‘Liberate yourself,’ Dustan said. ‘I’ve been reading Austen all day, I need some darkness.’

I should pause here to mention that at this point I was still questioning Dustan’s sexual orientation. It wasn’t so much his fondness for female authors as his startling androgynous features. I was jealous of his long eyelashes, his cleverly placed freckles, his perfect fingernails. He was a far more beautiful woman than I would ever be. Maybe this was the reason I opened up to him that day, maybe it was the dark comfort of the musty cave contrasting with the poisonous heat of outside. Maybe it was because I had well and truly had enough. Maybe it was timing, maybe it was fate and maybe it was nothing.

‘Well,’ I said, setting myself on the counter in front of him, ‘what’s the opposite of rose-coloured glasses?’

‘Dust-coloured glasses,’ Dustan replied, as if it was a subject he had given a lot of thought.

‘Then I’m starting to see the world through dust-coloured glasses, Dustan.’ My head was throbbing at this point from the frequency of dust, both in our dialogue and in the shelves around me. ‘People,’ I continued, ‘just aren’t beautiful any more. They’re ugly, ugly things. Infected things. And not the type of infected where they just want to curl up in bed with some soup and a book, but the type of infected where they run around the streets, biting people’s necks, infecting them too..’

‘Vampire-infected?’

‘Vampire-infected. But instead of taking something out, like blood, they’re putting something in ... misery.’

‘You need to stop working in retail, darling.’ Darling.

‘There was this man at work today, right. He asked me whether we stocked a particular brand of dishwashing liquid. I said, “Hold on one second, sir, I’ll have to check my computer”. So he called me an incom-

petent bitch because I couldn't tell him off the top of my head. Then he told the people waiting in line not to bother asking me any questions because I "didn't know shit", then he walked out.'

'And did you think to yourself, "Aren't I blessed to be sane, unlike that man"?''

'The first fifty times I did, Dustan. The first fifty times I did. But when it happens ten times every day, you stop thinking that. You start thinking that they're the sane ones, and you're the outcast. You're the outcast for not embracing doom and gloom and misery and anger and infection, infection, infection.' I sneezed again.

Dustan stared at me for a very long time. It was a solid stare, so I thought I better not interrupt it and just let him go on with it for a while. By the end of it, it was like our pupils had been burnt into each other. I was frightened that I'd have to sit on that counter forever, staring at Dustan while he stared back at me, because if I turned away the force of it would snap my neck. But eventually, Dustan looked down at his hands. That was when he invited me to play the game.

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It was then that I became obsessed, waiting for the three months to pass before the next game was to be held. I kept going over the rules in my head, spinning them around and around and upside down, trying to see if they made sense at different angles. But I couldn't grasp them, and I knew I wouldn't until the time came for me to play. Dustan said it never made sense until you actually saw it, like a word that's strange when written on paper but familiar when spoken out loud. So I held onto that day in the distant future, knowing that everything would be alright when it came. I could trudge through the misery, clutching the rules of the game as if they were a rainbow rope, one that was thin yet strong.

I got through the three months. There were many times when I wondered why we had to wait so long. It was like someone telling a basketball player they couldn't shoot hoops for three months, even though they had a ball and a net in their own backyard. But I got through it. In preparation for the event, we had to stay inside for seven days straight before the set date. One hundred and sixty-eight hours. When this time finally came, I told work that I was sick with an infection, which was so

close to the truth that I had to laugh. And I bunkered myself up in my house, pretending for two days that I was a World War II soldier, for the next two that I was a captive on a pirate ship and for the next two that I was a mole. On the night before the final day I pretended that I was a girl who had seen the world through dust-coloured glasses for too long and was ready to have the blinds opened.

Dad didn't question it. He brought me Indian for dinner that night, vegetable korma, and we ate it at the dinner table. I had told him that I wasn't allowed to watch any television, in case the news came on and reminded me of the sordid orb on which we walked every day.

'What if there was a major terrorist attack?' Dad asked, as he swapped his broccoli for my carrots.

'Well, I'd find out in a few days.'

'What about a pandemic infection?'

'Dad ... the world *is* a pandemic infection.'

He laughed, and swiped the remaining carrots off my plate, dripping thick saffron goo onto the table. It was such a bright yellow, the kind of yellow artists wished they could find when they tried to paint daffodils or the sun or Sleeping Beauty's hair.

Shortly after dinner, Dustan rang me.

'Are you ready?' he asked. I could imagine his eyes sparkling, veiled beneath his perfect lashes.

I nodded, and then remembering that he couldn't see me, mumbled a feeble, 'Yes'. Dustan laughed, and I realised that he rarely laughed. He smiled and he stared and he bit his lip occasionally. Yet hardly any laughter. Maybe that was why he needed to play the game.

'Okay, it's time to tell you the location. Remember it, because you're not allowed to write it down. It's forbidden. It's secret.'

'I'll remember.'

'Pattergrove Park, western hill. Eight pm.'

'Pattergrove Park?'

'Shhh. Did your dad hear you?'

'No. I'm sorry. I just ... don't see what's so secret about Pattergrove Park.'

‘You will. Tomorrow night at eight pm.’

I felt a strange shiver go down my spine and immediately felt terribly stupid. After Dustan hung up, the shiver seemed to curl around to my front and settle down in my stomach, like a cat in front of a fire. It was nervousness. I was nervous that I wouldn’t understand the rules, that I would break the rules, that I would be cast away from my only hope, that I would be laughed at. That Dustan would laugh at me. Dad came up behind me as I held the phone to my chest and cupped my head in his large hands.

‘Night, kiddo,’ he said. ‘Enjoy that important meeting you have tomorrow night ... with Dustan.’ He thought it was a date, which I didn’t understand. Surely he could see that Dustan was way too pretty for me. The cat in my stomach meowed.

The morning was upon me in seconds, quickly devoured by midday, which was even rapidly wolfed down by afternoon. I dialled Dustan’s number with shaking fingers at six o’clock.

‘Abby,’ he greeted. ‘I bet you can taste it. It’s that close.’

‘Do I have to bring anything?’ I asked, trying to control the tremor in my voice.

‘Just yourself,’ he replied. ‘And a jumper. It’s cold out.’

‘Can I meet you at the shop?’

‘No, Abby. You have to come by yourself. It’s part of the rules. Don’t be scared. You’ll pick it up in no time.’

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And so we are here to play the game, the one Dustan told me about long ago in January. There are twenty-seven people here, I have counted. Two of them I recognise. Mrs Liloet, Dad’s friend, and Cormac Ridder, the mailman. I wonder how everyone finds out about this, who tells them, who invented it. But Dustan has told me to stop thinking and to sip the mild April air. It is seven-fifty-three.

‘Dustan,’ I say suddenly. We are sitting on the hill next to each other, looking out across the valley. The city light is behind us and the trees are swathed in dusty darkness.

‘Yes?’

‘I have something to confess.’

Dustan looks at me strangely. ‘Well, I guess this is the best time to do it.’

‘It’s more of a question, really...’

‘You can ask me anything, Abby.’

People are beginning to stand up and I know the minute hand is ticking closer and closer.

‘Do you like men or women?’ The words slip out like a slippery fish, before I have time to articulate them or garnish them. I have a sudden feeling that I am disqualified from the game, that I have broken some sort of rule.

Dustan laughs, the second laugh I have heard from him in the past two days.

‘I’m not gay,’ he says. ‘I knew you thought it. I was waiting for you to ask. But I didn’t care, because I knew it didn’t matter to you.’

‘It doesn’t,’ I say. His laugh has sent a ripple of relief through my body and I know that I haven’t broken any rules; if anything, I have given myself extra points.

‘It’s seven fifty-eight,’ Dustan says, leaning in close to me, fixing me with his intense stare. ‘It’s time we joined the others.’

He takes my hand and leads me over to where the rest of the players are beginning to gather. We stand in a curve on the hilltop, our backs to the city. It must be seven fifty-nine by now.

‘Are you ready?’ Dustan asks. ‘The rules are simple, Abby. You remember them, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I say quietly. ‘Relax, be still and watch the sky.’

And as eight o’clock rolls into existence, all twenty-seven of our heads turn up to look at the stars. I don’t question the simplicity of it, the brilliance of it, the starkness of it. And just like that, I shed the rest of the world off my shoulders like a heavy cloak. It is so much easier than I thought, so much easier than Dustan made it out to be. But maybe I’m just a natural. Maybe I want the prize more than anyone else. Maybe I need to stop saying maybes. So I stop and I watch the sky and I play the game and I think I win.

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Kahli Scott is a new writer who loves to pen fusions of fantasy and reality. She currently lives in Brisbane but resides more frequently inside her own head.

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