

Bad Weather

By Kate Sunners

Teddy Henry's service would be the first time Atkins had been back to the church since her grandmother's own sparse and poorly attended affair.

She parked roadside outside the heritage green church, anachronistic and quaint beside the factory sheds and agricultural supply stores lining the country road like hopeful teeth. She released a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding. The rain, at least, had gone from a tropical bellow to a European spit, somewhere between mist and an outright downpour. Atkins made it to the café with just a light dusting of moisture on her blazer. She was still dressed for work, she realised. Enough black with slacks and blazer, but the loud crimson of her blouse would stand out at a funeral. She'd called in sick to work at the last minute, undecided about the funeral even as her body had steered her back to her old hometown. Approaching the counter, she neatened herself, buttoning her blazer to try and tuck as much of the crimson away as possible. She smiled grimly at her own expense. She always seemed to be trying to tuck bits of herself away from sight.

The perennial selection of pies, vanilla slice and a lone, semi-frozen fly awaited her at the counter. It had been an age since she'd been in here, ducking in for a flavoured milk on a walk



about town as a teen, but it seemed that not much had changed. She ordered a coffee, already regretting it as she sat and realised how tense she was. Coffee would give her the jitters. But from this vantage she'd at least be able to see when she'd be able to sneak unnoticed into the back of the church.

It wasn't far to her place at Cooran. She could go home. Or down to Boreen Point and plunge herself into the warm, shallow water. She and Hannah went there to swim whenever she was up from Melbourne. Atkins couldn't think of the

lake without recalling Hannah's dry humour. "Like a warm bath full of sharks," she had once observed.

Atkins and Hannah had gone up the Noosa Everglades in a kayak last time, through cathedrals of trees, dripping with vines that let in the occasional dazzling spot of light. They'd picnicked at Harry's Hut and rested, Hannah's head resting on Atkins' thigh. Hannah had heaved a sigh that carried the cold of another Melbourne winter in it.

"Just a few more years in this job, and I'll be here to stay."

Atkins had never raised the possibility of moving to Melbourne to be with Hannah, and Hannah had never asked her to. It would kill her to leave the hard-earned bush block, and they both knew it. Hannah had reached up for Atkins' hand, and they'd lain silent for a while beneath a canopy of glittering, spinning leaves, lost in daydreams of future selves who would kayak the weekends away.

She both wished Hannah were here now and was glad to be alone. On many of the early nights they'd spent together, the story of that day had sat in her throat, but she'd never found the courage to tell it. Atkins hadn't thought she could bear it if Hannah proved to be the kind of person whose expression would be quickly, diplomatically, wiped blank by the retelling.

The cars had begun to filter into the church driveway. Atkins sipped slowly, but hidden from sight, her foot jiggled manically.

She left the café when she saw most of the crowd had been sucked inside the church's back door. Muted music was filtering out. Another mourner, running late, dashed to the door and Atkins, taking the opportunity for anonymity, filed in behind and quickly sat in the back, before her legs could take her out again. Bad things happened to people who didn't make their peace. Old Wolfgang down the road from her place had been felled by a stroke last year, in the midst of a court case with his neighbour over a ten-year-old fencing dispute. He'd been found at the bottom of his garden, half obscured by the broad, heart-shaped leaves of alocasia.

Atkins' own grandmother, Nan Pat had wobbled through the last few years of her existence, miserable, and confused at life as if she were lost at sea. Unable to forgive her daughter's years of addiction and transitory living. Nan Pat had died clasping tight to her misery, refusing to see Atkins' mother. Even Atkins had to admit that the finality of this rejection was a true cruelty. Her own inability to convince Nan Pat to reconcile had wrapped Atkins in a caul of guilt for years, making the tense threads of reconnection with the mother who had been absent most of her youth even more strained.

There was a photo of Mister Henry at the front of the church, behind which sat a sedate black coffin with a panel open so mourners could view his face. The image had been taken a while before he'd been her teacher. In his forties, perhaps. Before he'd gone fully grey and the lines

around his mouth and eyes had deepened.

The church was full, but not packed. Former students who still lived in the area filled the back pews. All were her age or a little younger. A few of them had brought young children with them. Atkins hoped she wouldn't see any of her classmates.

As the service started, the rain began again. The corrugated iron roof drowned out all but the loudest words spoken by the Reverend. He tried to raise his voice above the rain while maintaining decorum, but Atkins was too far at the back to hear what was said.

She'd never spoken to him again, her favourite teacher, afterwards. There was no way of normalising what had happened, no way of steadying her emotions around it, particularly after the way they had reacted. The experience had created a vacuum into which her hurt tumbled endlessly. She'd never even seen the Henrys again until she was in her early thirties, after purchasing the Cooran block. She'd spotted their reflections in the refrigerator door at the supermarket as they passed by her back and had remained in the aisle, an icicle of indecision, breath frozen in her mouth until she was sure they'd left. Since then, she'd mostly driven to Cooroy or Tewantin to do her shopping.

The Reverend gave a slightly quizzical look at the roof as if wondering whether to carry on with the eulogy unabated. He tilted his head at the front row and an old woman stood up, stalking with bird-like steps up towards the speaker's

stand. Miriam hadn't aged well, even in the seven or so years since Atkins had seen her in the supermarket. Her legs and arms had become almost skeletal, and her spine was curved. Her eyes, once bright and hard and unusually dark, like black calcite, looked as though she'd stepped into a mist she'd never quite made it out of. The rain eased some way into her quiet eulogy, and Atkins heard a little of how the Henrys had met, how he had proposed, and how they had decided that, because they weren't able to have children, they would invest as much into the children they taught as they were able. A sea of ex-students nodded their heads around her like sugarcane in the wind. Atkins had been one such investment she supposed. Living close by, and fatherless as she was, perhaps Mister Henry invested more in her than he had done with his other pupils.

She'd known Mister Henry as a neighbour before she'd ever had classes with him, but didn't have much to do with him until seventh grade. She'd struggled a bit with schooling, having missed a fair bit of it early on and still having some strange and outlandish behaviours left over from her time with her mother. Atkins had never felt very close with any of her school mates. She'd had crushes on one or two of the older girls, but that was reason enough to keep her mouth shut and not let anyone get close enough to sniff out the queerness. During her time with her grandmother—after a few abortive years in primary schools up and down the coast of Queensland following her mother's latest beau—

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Mister Henry.**

Atkins had mostly interacted with older people.

Mister Henry was the kindest and most patient teacher she had. He'd made her feel not only cared for, but understood. And he had noticed her talent for computers. It made her feel as though she had something to offer.

He'd been a broad man, who towered over his pupils, but had always tried to lower himself to their level. Atkins had a vivid memory of him bent over her shoulder as she sat in front of the school's Tandy Colour computer, learning BASIC. The rich bass tones of his voice drawing her attention to her small successes.

"Yes, Maggie, that's spot on, mate."

The older-man smell of him. Cedar. Anise. Tobacco. Some days, fresh cut grass. She remembered the feeling when he'd withdrawn from her spot at the terminal and moved on to the next kid with their hand in the air; disappointment, and a feeling like unacknowledged thirst. The feeling had expanded in her over the three years in which he was her teacher.

In those years with Mister Henry as her teacher she'd excelled academically for the first time in her life. It was like a switch had been thrown in her brain. Every moment of study was driven by that deep voice that had become almost inseparable from her own inner voice, "Spot on,

mate," or "Not quite there yet Mags, but keep going and you'll get it."

It was love, and a feeling that bordered on obsession. She'd filled the gaping holes in her selfhood with pieces of Mister Henry. Sometimes, late at night, she'd be so overwhelmed by the crashing, spinning electrons of emotion that she'd lace her worn Volleys, and run down the road to his house, ducking behind trees at the hint of any headlights. He had become her nucleus, in that strange way that people do when a body is full of hormones, when the child is being sloughed away, but the adult has not yet fully emerged. She would stand and watch the dark house and wonder what life would have been like living with Mister Henry.

He'd come to see her grandmother while Atkins was staying overnight with a friend. He told Nan Pat that Atkins should be enrolled the following year at a technical college in Brisbane. He thought she should be set on the path to a career in programming. Nan Pat had been so proud to tell Atkins about her teacher's plan. Atkins face had gone blank as it did in those days whenever there was any whiff of change. If she did not react, perhaps it would be forgotten, would pass and everything could go on as it had done. This was not the case. A few days later, Mister Henry invited them over after school,

“For tea and a bite to eat and a chat.”

Miriam finished her eulogy. The Reverend came back on the stage, trying to hide his look of relief that the rain had eased. He welcomed up a former student to speak, and stood behind him, head bowed, looking thoughtful. The former student rambled through a selection of saccharine moments about how Mister Henry had touched his life and made him everything he was today. Atkins wondered if she were the only person in the world who had ever beheld the specific brand of fear and disgust—and something that might have been desire—that had been in Mister Henry’s face that day.

Nan Pat had been fighting off a cold and thought it best not to leave the house, so Atkins had gone on her own. When she arrived, Miriam had been in the kitchen, simultaneously preparing scones and cooking a silverside for dinner. She’d been wearing a little beribboned half-apron and her heeled shoes when she’d let Atkins in, motioning her to the den where Mister Henry was waiting.

“Ta for the jam,” she’d said, taking the jar of her grandmother’s marmalade, “Don’t mind if I don’t join you, Maggie, I’ve got plenty to do with the cooking and the marking.”

Mrs Henry was known to prefer the younger kids and taught years three to five—she was pretty hard on the teenagers when she was walking around on lunch duty. She’d never bothered to say much to Atkins.

Still in her uniform, which she took specific

care to wash and iron every second night, Atkins descended to the sunken lounge area in the middle of the house. There was a little atrium on one side where ferns and weeds brought in by birds ran rampant. The Henrys didn’t have the time to garden, and so had let nature take its course. The den always smelled faintly of damp and of leather from the comfortable lounge.

Mister Henry had been sitting in the single recliner that faced the lounge as she entered and had stood and waved her to the lounge.

“Come in, come in. Where’s Pat?”

“Feeling under the weather, Sir,” Atkins said as she sat on the edge of the lounge, too anxious to sink back as she usually did. She was dreading him saying something about the college.

“She said to say sorry she couldn’t make it. Sent some jam though.”

The Henrys must have had a cupboard full of her grandmother’s jams and chutneys. Pat’s rule was never to enter a house without bringing a little something.

Mister Henry had grabbed some papers off the dresser and sat beside her on the couch.

“Your grandmother said she spoke to you about this. There’s a college in Brisbane I think you’d get a lot out of.”

“It’s marmalade, I think. I don’t really like it but—” Atkins had fumbled for any topic but this one. Her teacher ploughed relentlessly on.

“You’re sixteen next year, and you’ve well and truly caught up with your schooling. They have an early entry; sort of a year twelve but as a college

student.”

“—she makes it too sugary.”

“It would give you a year to learn what they’re all about and get settled before they hit you with the really heavy content. They have excellent computer and programming courses.”

The application papers were thrust into her hands. Here it was. There was no avoiding it. Atkins was a child who’d never had any control over the decisions that threw her down the various paths of her life. She’d once had the jarring experience of identifying with a pinball as she walked by an arcade game in a cinema. It hadn’t occurred to her she could have any say over being sent away.

“I have to use the bathroom,” she’d said, and had rushed to the toilet, dropping the sheaf of papers on the lounge. She heard them spill to the floor as she left but could feel bile rising in her throat. Mrs Henry insisted on always shutting the toilet lid, with its furry lime-green cover, and there was no time to open it, so Atkins threw up in the narrow hand basin beside the toilet instead.

She was going to be sent away; moved again. Didn’t he understand that she needed to be here? That she didn’t know how to be this new emerging self without his reassuring words? That she needed for everything to stay the same?

She spat, and let the water run until the residue of her lunch was gone. The smell lingered. She splashed water on her face, dizzy, and sat on the furry toilet lid. The dizziness passed and she did what she had always done. Tamped down the

feelings, shut off her fear of this new change by refusing to think about it, made her face neutral. She would just take the papers, say thanks and leave. Her white blouse was soaked through from the water dripping off her face and fringe. Her bra was visible. Mechanically, Atkins took off her shirt and flapped it wildly, trying to dry it so she could leave, and go home to bed and refuse to go to school in the morning until everything had passed.

“Alright in there?” his warm voice had come from just outside the door, left ajar in her sick rush. Her body moved automatically, defiantly. Atkins yanked open the door, still in her bra and school skirt.

“Oh, are, is—” Mister Henry stammered, reaching out his hand to her, and then pulling it back as if she would sting him. Something self-punishing rose in her, refusing the knowledge of her body’s attraction to other girls, trying never to think about it, knowing what Nan Pat would think of it. Staring him straight in the eyes, she’d flicked open the clasp of her bra, dropping the garment on the black and white tiles.

Teddy Henry’s eyes went wide. Flicked down to her brown areolas as she swiftly unzipped her skirt and let it fall beside her bra. She could not say the words caught in her throat—don’t make me go—but they echoed over and over in her head as she stood there in her underpants, eyes locked with her teacher, pleading with him, enraged with him. Begging him to want her to stay. Showing him she was not the good student

he thought she was. There was no way this college would accept a student so “troubled,” the description a teacher librarian had once labelled her with.

A click in his throat as he swallowed made her regret her actions.

“Is everything—” Miriam had come clapping down the hall, seen her husband stone still, hand out before him as if he were warding off evil, and poked her head around the toilet door.

“Oh my god! What in—”

“It’s ok Miriam, she just—”

Miriam had grabbed Atkins fiercely by the wrist, wrenching her out of the bathroom in her underwear, across the sunken lounge and pushed her bodily out the front door. She’d run, her heels clapping on the tiles, back into the house and emerged only to throw Atkins clothes, still damp, at Atkin’s head.

That expression, and then a glimpse of him in a supermarket. Now they were playing a selection of his favourite music and letting people come up to view his corpse.

On that day, which had never yet ended because it always played again in her mind, Atkins had thrown on her clothes and walked up the long drive, breathing quickly, her brain trying to do its work of repressing thought. But it was backfiring. Every time her mind threw up the image of Mister Henry’s fearful face, she would try and squash it down and it would be replaced by a memory of her mother. Her mother fucking a short-lived boyfriend on the couch they both

slept on, while Atkins, five or six years old sat in the same room, in front of the television. Her mother in an oversized, patterned shirt and nothing else, on the balcony of a Gold Coast high rise, a thick fog of smoke emerging from between her lips as she exhaled at the world below.

She’d stumbled blindly home, snuck in her window so Nan Pat wouldn’t know she was back, crawled first into bed and then, as if under compulsion, had slid her lithe sixteen-year-old body under the bed.

Since the day her mother had lost custody, Atkins had not cried on her own account. Crying for herself was a useless exercise, she had decided. Since then she had only shed a tear for a half-dead roo hit by her grandmother’s car and at the occasional TV program. After leaving the Henrys’ house, she sobbed, silently, open-mouthed on the floor beneath her bed, so hard that a hanging ornament on her doorknob had clinked quietly against the wood. Then she ceased, fearing discovery, curled into a ball and fell into a daze. Why on earth had she just done what she had done?

She had still been under the bed when Miriam had come charging into the house, rousing her grandmother from the settee in the lounge. She had heard a stream of words from Miriam—all indistinguishable in a hissed tone. She thought she heard the words reputation, scandal, teacher and deviant.

When she crawled out from under her bed later, more fearful of living in ignorance of what

had been said of her than she was of facing her grandmother, she had found Nan Pat at the table, cheeks ash-grey.

“We’ll go to the big smoke together,” Nan Pat had said firmly. “I don’t want you all alone in some boarding school and I’m not going to have those Henrys coming anywhere near you.”

Atkins had ended up going to the college after all.

It was only years later that Nan Pat told her Miriam had threatened to go to Child Services, to tell them Nan Pat wasn’t up to the task of raising the wild and devious Maggie Atkins. It had made Atkins wonder all over again where Mister Henry had been in all this. Wonder whether he’d ever moved from his frozen spot by the bathroom. Had he given up all agency in the face of his wife’s rage?

Atkins, lost in recollection with her head bowed did not realise until too late that the mourners at the front had begun to file into the central aisle to exit, Miriam at the head, her arm held by a woman a decade or two younger, who had the look of a teacher about her. Atkins had sat at the end of a pew, to make a quick getaway, but realised now that this was a mistake. The old woman was turning from side to side to nod at each row, acknowledging their attendance. If Atkins slunk out now, it would be obvious.

Miriam was halfway up the aisle. She was still immaculately dressed, as if she’d emerged from a fifties catalogue, but on her aged body the outfit looked incongruous. What on earth was this

woman doing in red lipstick, clopping down the aisle in those ridiculous heels? For whom was she signalling her sexual readiness with her ancient skin buried beneath these absurd symbols of sexuality?

Thinking back, Atkins remembered the teacher had always been like this. A full face of makeup every day. Heels that made walking on the uneven surfaces of ovals and playgrounds difficult, if not impossible. The cinching of her waist with tight skirts and thick fabric belts. The kids had all thought she was the most glamorous, unapproachable human they’d ever met, and Atkins had always thought Miriam dressed that way to intimidate the kids. Now she realised that Miriam had dressed this way for Teddy. Had worn the little ribboned apron for him that day. Her tight lips around the teenaged kids in his classes were on his account. It was in the way she’d grasped his forearm when Atkins had seen them in the supermarket. Jesus Christ, Miriam was about as insecure as it was possible to be, Atkins just hadn’t been able to see it. She’d been stuck in a fog of her own fear and guilt and childhood notions of the Henrys’ perfection.

She suddenly felt like laughing at her own blindness. Miriam was upon her, turning her head right and giving a little sad nod, and then left. Their eyes met. Atkins gave Miriam the blank, emotionless stare that had freaked her classmates out in school. Miriam clocked her, she was sure. The woman’s mouth turned down a little, her eyes narrowed as she kept moving, perhaps trying

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to work out where she'd seen Atkins' face before.

Mourners milled on the small lawn as trucks rumbled past. Miriam was occupied, but Atkins found she no longer cared whether or not she was spotted. Miriam would find Atkins could no longer be hauled by her wrists out of a room. On her way to her car, she stopped in front of Miriam and waited for an older couple to peel away. She locked eyes with the old woman, seeing the recognition in her face. She realised that some part of her, some unacknowledged part, a secret raging at her core, had been seeking this confrontation since she'd walked shakily home from the Henrys' house all those years ago.

Like a spectre she stood unspeaking, holding the old woman's gaze, feeling the strength in her body, feet planted solidly in the earth.

"Cruel, what life takes from us, isn't it?" Atkins said, and walked away, not giving Miriam time to reply.

Atkins' ute seemed to pilot itself to Boreen Point. She parked the car near the village's only coffee shop, right in front of the lake. The shore was deserted except for a hopeful kayak rental guy. The water a dull matte grey; the stormy palette of the sky poured into the lake. She wandered through the campground and took a

trail through the paperbark trees out to a little isolated point. A miniature beach was formed between the roots of two immense trees, behind a thicket of something weedy. She sat, and heaved a sigh.

She felt simultaneously lighter, and like a bit of a dickhead for messing with an old woman on the day of her husband's funeral. There was grief there too, she acknowledged, for Mister Henry, whom she had loved. She still hoped that she'd misread the expression of desire on his face on that day which festered within her for so long.

She wished for a moment that she'd spoken to him again before he died. It was like he'd been absorbed by his wife's rage, as if all his years of kindness had been erased by her, and Atkins still had no clue what he'd thought of it all, or how he'd reacted after she had been cast from the Henrys' house. She imagined him again, as she always had, with the sheaf of paper in his hands, and pondered his reaction.

Atkins shrugged. If he had let his wife do that—eject Atkins from their home, threaten her grandmother and then never contact them again—then perhaps he had never cared about her in the way she imagined. Or perhaps he had been too frightened of a scandal and risking his

career to reach out.

The sudden claustrophobia of her clothes surprised her; her fingers unbuttoned the blazer and she had flung the blouse from her before she even registered her intention. She rubbed her sandy hands against the warmth of her biceps and felt the needles of the coastal sheoak between her toes. The water like a cup of tea left too long before drinking. She cupped her knees and pushed out in a breaststroke. The protective curve of the trees around the expanse of the lake visible as she raised her head from the water. Two kids in a sailboat cackled at her naked body as they went by, her nudity nothing more than innocent hilarity to them. She laughed, and waved.

Image: "[Brisbane rain](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [interestedbystander](#)