

## How to Start Again

The four-bedroom rental sat halfway down a side street off New Canterbury Road. It was advertised as ‘conveniently located’ when Helen saw it up for lease, but that was an oversell: the arterial road she drove in on doubled on itself at the whim of a bent Sydney town planner. There were two train stations within walking distance of each other (both skipped on every second trip), and a tram line that terminated around the corner in Dulwich Hill, indefinitely out of service after cracks were found in the chassis of a tram, the fleet shipped back to Spain for repair. The KFC at the end of the street closed at nine p.m., and the rows of vacant shops that marked a ‘changing’ neighbourhood lent the feeling that all roads led *away* from the house. As Helen pulled into the driveway in the ’91 Corolla she’d inherited, she accepted that all this inconvenience was why they’d been able to secure the lease in the first place. Even in a housing crisis, each flaw of architecture and urban planning that lay before her made this building a slow mover.

Helen headed straight to the For Lease signs spiked into the patchy lawn by three different real estate companies. After flinging them one by one at the wheelie bins, she examined the house for the first time since the inspection, now with the gaze of a tenant. She saw white paint flaking off the cladding, timber steps gnawed at by termites (their tracks through the timber painted over), and a concrete front porch that she remembered as a highlight, but now looked sad and uninviting. She realised then that she and Sunny had treated the inspection as more of a contest than a critical assessment.

Helen fumbled the envelope she’d picked up from the real estate agent in Ashfield, found the front door key and pushed her

way inside. Her reward was the smell of forty-year-old carpets, long trapped in a mid-century house. In through the corridor, she recalled the inspection where they were guided past the master bedroom with the splintering built-ins, the damp second bedroom with a south-facing window, and two more rooms that, while large enough to *hold* a bed, were questionably categorised as bedrooms. She opened the windows as she went: through the living room, which, though spacious, had a window that looked directly into the kitchen of a neighbouring apartment block; past the bathroom, the upside of a bathtub accompanied by a rich spectrum of coloured moulds between the tiles; through the kitchen, with the peeling laminate surface of what was once a breakfast bar; and then into the yard, which stretched out to the size of a rugby league field. When the real estate agent had walked them into that yard (past the concrete laundry and its walls of cheap masonite tacked to flimsy timber frames), she had asked defensively if they had concerns about privacy, and Helen had murmured, 'I guess you wouldn't want to.' She had reeled then at the three new apartment blocks that flanked the house, with all their balconies and sightlines into the yard. Helen remembered that moment as a victorious one, knowing from the agent's sheepish glances that the young families and secretly wealthy youths at the inspection had baulked at the idea of being watched by the neighbours. When they left the inspection with the spare parts of an application handed over, Sunny said they were certainties, claiming their insurmountable advantage was their 'vibrant personalities, low standards, and fifteen-year rental histories'. She had struggled to match their enthusiasm.

Helen wedged the door open and came back through the house, examining the room they'd all decided would be hers: the second

largest, because the couple would need the master bedroom, and that by finding the place and doing the legwork, she was owed the next best as a finder's fee. She brought her things in from the car, committed to setting up her room on the first attempt. Stuck until the larger furniture arrived, she worked backwards instead, hanging her pictures and finding places for small pieces of furniture, running power boards and extension leads from the sole outlet in the corner of the room. She began the awkward assembly of her bed frame, that she had bought for her and her ex's spare room, a bed that was never slept in until the last few months of their relationship when Suze suddenly claimed to be unable to tolerate Helen's snoring. She shook that off and pictured different layouts of bookshelves and side tables until she could imagine the formation of her routines. Fishing through her boxes, she found a temporary spot for everything that could be homed without the rest of the furniture, and then sat on the floor. She waited on the removalist she'd paid to bring around her mattress, desk and wardrobe from the apartment that Suze could now call her own.

Beth arrived, driven in loudly by two of her brothers in a muddied Hilux with a broken muffler. The men unpacked wordlessly, nodding at Helen on their way through with Beth's mattress, her bookshelf, and her favourite set of drawers, all dropped indiscriminately in Beth's tiny room. Helen went to introduce herself, but they moved quickly, unimpressed by the house as they continued bringing Beth's things in, shooting glances of concern at their sister until they were done, smiling, leaving back to their family home.

'Everything okay?' Helen asked from the hallway, leaning on the doorframe to Beth's room, which was smaller than either of them remembered.