

‘The ants have moved in here now.’ Rachel brushed the small body aside and turned the pillow over.

Eliza glanced up from her book.

‘The ants. In the sitting room. They’ve followed us in here,’ Rachel said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘I just saw one.’

‘No, are you sure it’s an ant? They’re so tiny, I don’t know how you could tell.’ Eliza returned to the hardback that was balanced on her bosom.

‘I don’t need glasses.’

‘Yet.’

Rachel prodded her. ‘Do ants bite?’

‘I’ve got to finish this for tomorrow.’

‘It’s definitely ants. The same ones that were on the sofa last summer. They got in through the gap in the window and now they’ve found a way in here. You couldn’t put a baby in a room with ants. Eliza?’

‘Yes?’

‘Did you see them before? When you slept on this side?’

‘No.’

‘You wouldn’t have noticed anyway.’

‘Maybe one.’

‘Is that why we swapped sides?’

The book fell away from Eliza's hand. 'What?'

'Nothing.'

'No. Tell me. You think I moved you to that side of the bed because it's infested?'

'It's okay. Read.' Rachel looked at her girlfriend. 'I know. Sorry.'

Eliza didn't go back to her reading but she kept the light on while Rachel fell asleep. She wondered whether she should get the pest controller from down the road to look at the flat. Mr Kargin. He had a second job repairing and selling old televisions. They had walked into his workshop one day, to buy an aerial for Rachel's black-and-white set. The man spent a long time looking through cardboard boxes and muttering about outdated equipment.

Eliza saw Rachel trying not to mind the posters on the wall, each one with a picture of a cockroach or a rat, along with a method of extermination. There were so many different creatures and all the pictures were the same size so the termites were as big as the squirrels. Mr Kargin stared at them both for some time.

'He stared at me,' Rachel said when they walked away from the shop. 'He was fine with you.'

He didn't find an aerial and he was bad tempered about the entire transaction though it had been his idea to start rummaging through the boxes. Eliza didn't imagine he made much money in television repairs but she thought the extermination business might be a means of expression as much as an extra income. She had promised Rachel they would never go back.

Rachel lay next to her, breathing heavily. It had been Eliza's idea to change places because she had a new desk and it wouldn't fit in the alcove on her side of the bed. It

was a practical decision and even Rachel could see that it made sense. The flat was already crowded with furniture and the desk could double as a bedside table, but maybe the desk had disturbed a nest or maybe it was the time of year for ants to move indoors. Eliza had not deliberately changed sides because of the insects but now she would have to prove that she cared enough to fix the problem. Ever since they had talked about having a baby, Rachel had been testing the temperature of Eliza's love.

Eliza wondered how many of her decisions were basically points of honour. Throughout her life, her job at the university, the bicycles and vegetarianism, even her haircut seemed as if they were chosen in reaction to the opinions of an invisible audience. She had become the sort of person she approved of but she wasn't sure she had chosen anything she actually wanted. She checked the pillow one last time and turned off the bedside light. She would sort out the ants in the morning.

### program

The next day, Eliza cycled past the television repair shop on the way to work. Smaller versions of the vermin posters were stuck inside the display window below precarious stacks of broken televisions. She thought of all the chemicals that the bad-tempered Mr Kargin would use in their flat. He seemed to radiate poison. Even ants didn't deserve a murderer like that.

They had talked about the ants over breakfast and Eliza had googled 'getting rid of ants'.

'All these ants look regular-sized. I can't find any photos of extra small ants.'