

The apartment is a humid, putrid place when she gets home, shut windows, dribbling roof. She watches dew gathering on the blighted leaves of their windowsill plants, night edging towards morning. Amidst the darkness, Jackson is slouched at his computer, head lolled over in sleep, online slot machine creating a kaleidoscope of colours that cycle endlessly on his face. He reeks. Garbage and clothes are scattered across the floor, leaving her stranded between islands of mess. Aimee itches for a cigarette or a shot, anything to take the edge off the crushing misery that is their home.

But she'd run out of smokes three hours ago, when she'd smothered the final one on a metal sink, a piece of gum in her mouth, using fingers to roughly comb her hair in the warped, dirty mirror of a public bathroom. Her mouth still sticks with the aftertaste of her client's prick, and she probably smells just as bad as Jackson – sex, sweat, cheap perfume and the stench of the metro. Their studio apartment is claustrophobic, her body craving escape... but she has class tomorrow, and work, and she's already behind.

"Aim's? Babe?" Jackson slurs, eyelids creeping back to reveal a sliver of blown out pupils, "Can y'do the laundry? I swear I'm gonna... I'm gonna win this one, just..." He trails off, eyes sliding shut. It feels like déjà vu.

Arms full of stained underwear, unravelling t-shirts and fraying pants, Aimee glimpses herself in the mirror. Smearred drugstore lipstick, tussled hair, concealer that's only highlighting her eyebags. Unbidden, her mother's disgusted face, calling her a whore, flickers through her mind like the dull yellow lightbulb above. Her mother was right, and they've run out of laundry powder.

The windowsill plants, lively and in full bloom, are a tangled mess, an echo of the two of them on the couch. Aimee isn't sure if she's high, or stoned, or just happy as she lays with Jackson. Skipping class for him again, just to help him get clean, just to help him organise

his new apartment. Just so he's happy. Reluctance vanishing when she sees just how much he needs her.

He's going to start getting clean, but his stash isn't empty yet, and it cost too much to just throw away. So now she's laying in her bra and underwear on his couch, finding symmetry in their dilated pupils, giggling into his chest hair like she's a teenage girl at a sleepover. A starving, perfect symbiosis of hands on his body and cocaine in her blood. He's going to get clean next time, he promises her, and it feels like *déjà vu*.

Jackson tells her he'll be rich if he wins big on the next slot, but Aimee can't focus on his ten-dollar words. She tells him she'll come over after class, but she's already missed it and missed her assessment. Nothing matters in this apartment, reality replaced with blackout curtains he bought with his father's credit card, the lingering scent of smoke, his hands on her waist. Jackson begs her to stay.

She stumbles through her front door as the sun rises the next day.

She sorts cash on the table; rent, bills, a tightrope trick between electricity or food. Cigarettes extinguished on the pot plants. Her tuition. There's a pile there for Jackson, there's always a pile for Jackson, and she pauses. Cumulative shifts of cleaning houses and sleeping with strangers, hours of work that she's been giving him for years now. He lumbers into the room.

White singlet, infected ear-piercing, his skin is pale without sun, green-speckled iris eclipsed by pupil, face gaunt. A dull blade twists in an evergreen wound as he rubs at his nose, afflicted with a near imperceptible tremor. Aimee knows. He's a shadow looming over her, a million in debt, a skeleton with skin.

"I thought you were clean." She hates to beg. She hates to ask for anything.

Jackson palms the cash from the table. It silently disappears into his pocket. He doesn't look at her. He leans against the window, tipping their stupid plants off the edge. They arc towards the floor, decayed leaves flailing helplessly. Dirt spills; a sick joke of wedding rose petals, roots forcibly disentangling, ripped from each other.

She had been trying to save them for months and months and months.

Aimee tenderly tries to fix it, put it back together to the discordant melody of Jackson's losing bet, just one last time. It feels like déjà vu.