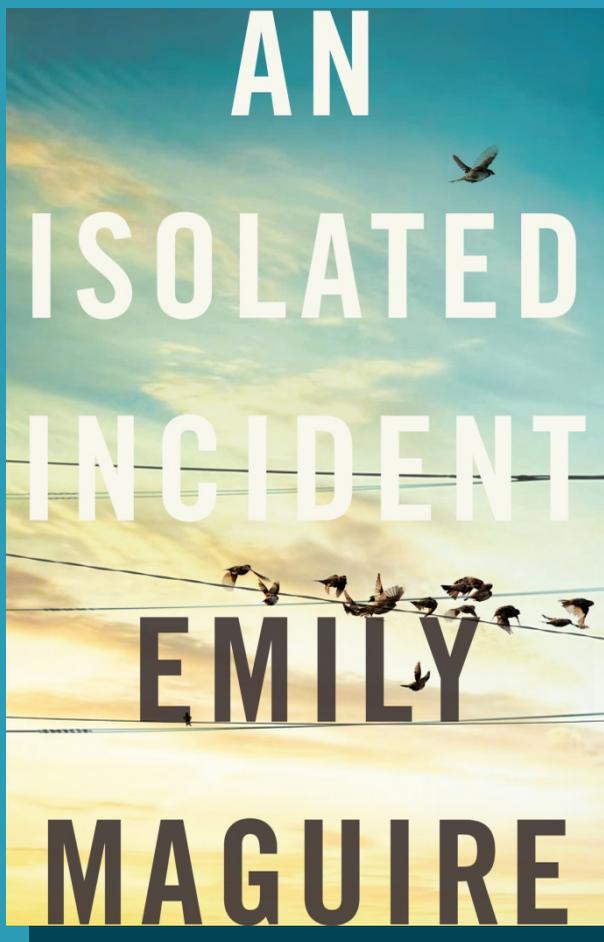


2017
SHORTLIST

MILES FRANKLIN
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



EXTRACT



Monday, 6 April

It was the new cop who came to the door, the young fella who'd only been on the job a couple of months. I thought that was a bit rough, sending a boy like him to do a job like that. Later, I found out that he was sent because he'd gone to pieces at the scene. That's what we all call it now: the scene.

'Miss Rogers?' he said, as though he was about to confess to reversing into my fence.

I nodded, waiting for the blow I knew was coming. I knew it was coming because Bella had been gone days and because no cop ever came to anyone's door to bring them cake or wine.

He rocked on his heels and cleared his throat.

'You found Bella?' I said, to give him a way to start. To show him it was okay.

'Yeah.' He blinked and I thought, *Jesus, he knows her*. 'I mean, there's been a body found. Matches her description. We need an official ID. Um, need you to come to . . . to do that. To confirm.'

Someone who's been hit as much as me should've known that seeing a blow coming, asking for it even, doesn't make it hurt any less. Probably hurts more, I reckon, because you're thinking yeah, yeah get it over with and you think you already know. So I stood there nodding, thinking how the poor kid knows my sister and what a rough job to give a new fella and then I was shaking so hard it was like a demon had got inside.

The whole way to the hospital I wanted to ask him what had happened. I was hoping she'd been hit by a car or had a brain embolism or something. I wanted to ask those questions I'd asked when Mum died: 'Was it quick? Did she suffer?' But I couldn't speak. Never happened to me before, no matter what drama I've been chucked into. But there in that car it was like . . . It was like when you're so sick with some damn stomach thing that you don't even want to say 'no' to the offer of ice chips to suck, don't even want to nod, because the tiniest movement will bring the spewing on again. Like that, but I didn't feel like spewing. I just felt like any sound or movement would start something that would hurt and be impossible to stop.



The cop, Matt was his name, told me that he knew her from school. ‘She was two years ahead of me, but it’s a small school, ya know?’ I knew. I went there myself. Bella was twelve years younger than me, which made this boy twenty-three – so not a boy at all, technically, but his clenched jaw was dotted with pimples and his hands on the wheel were smooth and unscarred. I asked him if he’d seen her since school and he nodded, smiled like a love-struck dork and said he’d seen her a few times at the nursing home where she worked. ‘We get called there a bit,’ he said and it was clear he never minded being called to that stinking place by my sister who, even in that blue polyester uniform and those clunky white nursing clogs, was the prettiest thing anyone in this hole of a town was ever likely to see.

At school we had an expression: Strathdee-good. It meant that something was tops by Strathdee standards but not much chop compared to anything you’d get outside of here. So if you had a particularly good pie or whatever, you’d say, *Man, this is good. Strathdee-good, obviously, but yeah.* We did the same thing for people. None of the blokes at our school could compete with boys from Sydney or Melbourne, obviously, but there were a few who were definitely Strathdee-hot and so they were the ones we’d go for.

Bella was, if I’m being honest, Strathdee-pretty. I was always telling her she could be a model if she wanted, and I still think that was true, but it’d be modelling in the Kmart catalogue not Vogue or anything. I’m not putting her down. Like I said, she was the most beautiful thing anyone around here had ever seen in the flesh, but she was five foot nothing in high heels and had a size 10 arse on a size 6 body. Her skin was like fresh milk, and her light blue eyes so goddamn lovely it made me jealous as hell when we were younger. She could’ve done cosmetic ads, for sure, except they’d have had to do something about her hair, which was thick and frizzy and grew out and up instead of down. I used to tease her, saying that she was actually an albino African and that Mum had just adopted her because she felt sorry for this poor kid who all the other Africans thought was a freak. When she was twelve or so she started getting up really early to go through the rigmarole of oiling and flat-ironing her hair before school and then I felt bad for tormenting her. I told her that her hair looked hot, that it was way nicer than my bog-standard mousy-brown mop, but she never believed me.



One good thing about getting older is you make peace with the things you can't change about yourself. Not that Bella ever got old, but she was always mature for her age. By nineteen or twenty she'd stopped straightening her hair every day and just let it frizz out over her shoulders. She had to tie it back for work, of course, and I loved it like that most of all; the front all smooth and sleek and out the back a giant blonde fuzzball.

I never had to make peace with my hair – it was never my problem. My problem was my tits. I was too young when they sprouted and then they grew so fast. Eleven, twelve, thirteen and becoming used to feeling naked, feeling rude because of the way that boys and men – old men, teacher men, family men, strange men, friendly men – looked at me and found reasons to touch me and press against me and every now and then go for a sneaky grope. It set me apart from the other girls and made their mothers narrow their eyes and suggest I put on a jumper when it wasn't cold and made the boys my age laugh and call out *slut* and *showusyertits* as I walked past. These giant tits that told everybody I was a *scrubber* and *easy* and *trash*.

For the first few years I tried to ignore them. I mean, ignore the effect they had on people. The things themselves I packed into bras which my mum bought grudgingly (I kept outgrowing them and then wearing through the nylon). Once she said, 'Try and slow down, Chris. I'm not made of money,' as she tossed a Target bag on the bed, and although I knew she was joking I still felt hurt and shamed like there might be some truth in the suggestion that I was growing these things on purpose.

At around fourteen I picked up the idea that I could diet them away, but a smaller arse only made them look more super-sized. I tried to keep them covered, but, you know, a mountain range covered in snow is still a mountain range. Then I gave in. Not to the men who tried to corner me, but to the name-callers and whispers. I pretended to be the thing they all thought I was.

And now, well, now, I wear low-cut tops and bend forward more than I need to if it's been a slow night for tips and I barely notice when men speak to my chest, women shoot death-stares at it and people of both sexes treat me like I have brain damage. Now, I've learnt to live with the fact that most blokes who come home with me will be breast-men and



that once in bed they'll spend more time nuzzling and squeezing than getting busy down below. I spend a lot of money on good bras and keep my thigh muscles strong so I can bounce up and down forever. Give 'em what they want.

I didn't choose to have an enormous rack, but you have to accept the things you cannot change, don't you? So I do. I accept that having big boobs makes me a popular barmaid and an excellent root. Not excellent-excellent probably, but Strathdee-excellent for sure.