

## FABULOUS LIVES

It was too late for Edith. She knew that when she stood in the lobby of 11 Howard Street staring at the warehouse-sized sterile room, empty except for a central round table with an iPad plonked in the middle. Ricky had organised this SoHo hotel for her and she wondered if it was intentional, to suggest a place where she was clearly not the intended demographic. At forty-eight, she was the oldest guest here, though it was difficult to tell the customers and hotel staff apart—everyone wore the same stock-standard uniform of dark hoodies and designer ripped jeans.

Edith felt wearied from the long journey from Australia and thankful that Ricky kept cancelling on her. He was held up in meetings with his agent, and then there was the situation with another acting friend. *You know the type, Edith. Real drama queen.*

So she spent the first few days on her own, walking the streets of SoHo and then visiting all the landmark

buildings—the Empire State Building, the Rockefeller Center, Grand Central Station. And it was quite surreal. She would have this sudden flash of familiarity—a sense of *déjà vu*, as if she had been here before—and then the frustration would take over as she pushed her pitiful brain to nut out exactly which movie scene she was remembering. In this way Edith never felt fully present, push-pulling her brain for a slice of *something*, so that the whole experience became dissatisfying and exhausting. Central Park was different though. She stood on the outer fringe of the park, saw the leafless, barely-alive trees, and the horses shivering and exhaling puffs of air like dragons, and thought dispassionately, this moment belongs only to me. It didn't last. It was too cold to stand outside—her Perth-bought coat clearly inadequate for a New York winter—so she crossed over the street and went to find refuge in an Italian-style restaurant.

The cheeriness of the place instantly lifted Edith's spirits. Big brass lamps glowed and candles flickered light into all the dark recesses, and the young waiters had a healthy sheen to their skin that suggested long summers in faraway places. She was shown a table one back from the window, so the only way she could see the park was to look through a gap created by another seated couple. A tiny gap, because, being in love, they spent the majority of the time leaning in towards each other, scalps almost touching. When they pulled away to deposit a spoonful of food into their mouths or take little sips of wine, she took advantage of the viewing

opportunity and greedily drank in a quick snapshot of the park.

Edith knew the restaurant would be expensive by the way the waiter shook out a cloth napkin onto her lap and filled the water glass to the brim. Even though Ricky had promised he would cover everything, she'd already paid for the hotel in advance and was worried about maxing out her credit card. She ordered a bowl of minestrone, hoping it would come with extra bread. The waiter withdrew from her quickly, and flitted around the other couple. Soon another waiter came over to their table with a bottle wrapped in a white cloth, and a flirtatious energy filled the room, oscillations of desire between the young couple and the two dark-eyed waiters, different permutations of body language and banter so that it was difficult to tell who was batting their thick lashes at whom.

The cynic in her questioned the performance, the waiters' motives. Truth be told, New York was all about the money—Edith had recognised that already. Throwing those dollar bills to waiters, taxi drivers, doormen, bellhops, when she should have been the one holding out her hand. Edith thought about her earlier life and whether she could have survived here on her own. A penniless, talentless girl. No, New York would have gobbled her up. Though there was always the groupie thing, attaching yourself to someone else's glitter and gold, before you end up barefoot and back in Nebraska.

\* \* \*

Edith hadn't spoken to Ricky in years, so when he had reached out to her via Facebook a month earlier, she was surprised. She'd had little contact with him since university and the unpleasantness of the graduation ceremony, and mainly kept up with all of his accomplishments through their common circle of friends. *Have you heard Ricky is doing a one-man show at Fringe? Have you seen Ricky in the new TV series on SBS?* It was better to hear it from others, for she couldn't continue to fake her enthusiasm over the phone; her voice gradually gave way to an insincerity—you could detect it in the lengthened vowels—*Ooooooh, how wonderful!*—a widening arc of despair. It seemed that Ricky was the better actor after all.

They had first met during orientation week, signing up for Theatre Sports, and then sat in the same row during the first Semiotics of Performance lecture. Edith had recognised Ricky instantly by the purple happy pants and his erect dancer's posture—all the other students slouched back, into their chairs. From a distance he could have passed as Chinese—pale, angular face, short black hair and almond eyes—but only when Edith finally spoke to him at length did she get a chance to examine his face up close, and she was surprised to see he was wearing makeup: a thick paste to mask his acne, and eyeliner drawn up into cat's eyes.

Edith hadn't warmed to Ricky immediately. She was brought up in a long line of Methodists, and although her parents weren't particularly religious, 'the meek shall inherit the earth' sentiment had morphed over time into 'thou shalt not blow one's own trumpet'. Ricky was loud and brash, and promoted himself at every opportunity. He pushed himself into conversational clusters and friendship cliques, and if at first he was barely tolerated, over time, by way of default, he became a necessary fixture. For Ricky livened up every party, converted every small event into a grand occasion, and being around him made everyone feel more talented and special. Especially Edith. She developed a theatrical flair, swapped her khaki shorts and baggy T-shirts for black leggings and sparkly tops, and wore massive hooped earrings that pulled at her lobes. Soon it became the Ricky and Edith show: they began to act like a couple, sharing lifts to classes or having a private bitch in the refectory before the others turned up for drinks. But they weren't really a couple, were they? For even in those special alone times with Ricky, she sometimes sensed a restlessness in him, a need to search out something better in the room, while she yabbered on about the latest production dramas. There was also the matter of his sexuality. One night when they had been out dancing at a club they had come back to his student room and fallen exhausted onto his bed. She had drunkenly made a pass at him, but he pushed her off deftly, rolled her away like a spare piece of carpet. She recovered from the humiliation by reimagining

Ricky as gay, but when he showed no interest in any of the boys in their class either, Edith began to see him as hermaphroditic—self-loving, like a snail.

The Head of Performance, Horst Steinway, wasn't so enamoured with Ricky, and neither were the other tutors. Ricky lost out on all the plum roles to Edith and a serious-looking student called Fabian, who wore John Lennon glasses, a Che Guevara beret, and a black duffle coat even on forty-degree days. But nothing stopped Ricky's indefatigable, irrepressible star quality. When he was cast as a hatstand in the Dario Fo play *Trumpets and Raspberries* he outshone everyone by bursting forth from his prop and doing some odd Butoh thing with his mouth. He brought the house down. Afterwards, Edith's parents had spent more time raving about his performance than her own, which was as the lead. *Oooh, that Ricky, he's a scream*, her mum had said. *You can't keep your eyes off him*. The other cast members laughed it off, but Edith was rattled, and Fabian, who was incensed at being upstaged by *that little shit*, threatened to take Ricky outside and give him a right thrashing. Everyone knew it was pure bluster: Fabian's revolutionary capabilities were limited exclusively to his wardrobe.

And then, after university, when everyone else was applying for NIDA (some for the third time), Ricky did the unthinkable—he got himself an agent, moved to Sydney and started to make a name for himself on the stage and small screen, while Edith and the others drifted in and out

of community theatre, and into sensible nine-to-five paying jobs. It was during a lunchtime break at the reception desk at the Sunset Retirement Village that Edith took the call from Ricky informing her that he had won the Green Card Lottery and was off to live in New York. He might as well have told her that he had just won a golden ticket to the rest of his life.

\* \* \*

Ricky was held up again in dress rehearsals, but he texted Edith to say they would finally meet for drinks in a small piano bar in the West Village. Marie's Crisis, originally a prostitutes' den in the 1850s, and now the go-to place for Broadway stars who came here on their days off to belt out show tunes. Or that's what Ricky had told Edith. But as she descended the stairs into the dingy, dark bar, she could see that the place was filled with predominantly gay men and tourists like herself, all hoping to experience something more than the balding man at the piano singing 'You're the Tops' in B flat. Before Edith could find Ricky, she was accosted by a pushy waitress, who demanded she order a drink or leave the premises. So Edith ordered a gin and tonic, handed over a ten-dollar bill, and then searched for Ricky's face in the packed room. It was difficult to see anything in the dim light. She concentrated on all the men on their own, but even then she couldn't be certain. The photo

on Ricky's IMDb and Facebook profiles seemed to have been taken years ago, when Ricky was about thirty—unless he had also been lucky in the DNA stakes and simply looked fabulous for his age.

One of the men standing at the back smiled at her, so she gave a tentative wave and he nodded back. She made her way towards him, feeling her stomach churn over and do small flips as if she was a teenage girl again. Close up she could see that it wasn't Ricky, though in a perverse way, she would have been glad if it was. For the man's face was weirdly putty-like—plumped, yet at the same time stretched tight, like a dried animal skin over sharp cheekbones—and his hairline a block of filled-in colour, as if someone had spray-painted black around his temples. Edith knew that effect. She had gone to a new hairdresser in the mall the day before she flew out and was shocked, when she was led back to the mirror, to see the same muddy colour at her roots also staining her forehead. Her previous salt-and-pepper locks were now a uniform, dull brown, and as the young girl had stood talking to Edith (but really talking to her own reflection) she had cut Edith's hair in blunt, unflattering layers, so that Edith's head looked lopsided, and the beginnings of a double chin were more apparent. Edith looked terrible. The Japanese had a word for it. *Age-otori*. People who look worse after a haircut. Edith had seen the same thing with her parents' poodle, Tiffany, when she came back from the doggy groomer's. How as soon as the bouncy white curls were shorn away, the true

nature of their pet was revealed: splotchy eczema-ravaged skin and a ratty head and tail—though it’s funny how people can quickly forgive the ugliness of a dog.

‘You’re not Ricky?’ she asked hopefully.

‘Sammy,’ he shouted back.

Edith stayed next to him for the rest of the evening, even when the text came through from Ricky saying that he was tied up and couldn’t make it after all. When Sammy and a group of Finnish students dressed in red anoraks sang along to a rendition of ‘Over the Rainbow’, Edith joined in too. She could hear that Sammy’s voice was rather good, far better than her own and that of the piano player, who was desperately trying to lob his voice an octave above the boisterous crowd. Edith looked around at all the people. Some were young and beautiful, with all the giddy expectancy of youth. Others, like Sammy, were deluded old fools. But here they all were, playing their part in this parallel universe to fame and fortune, as if better versions of themselves were out there already, treading the boards of Broadway, their names up in lights.

At eleven o’clock, Edith felt waves of nausea flow over her body and knew she couldn’t stay awake any longer. She said goodbye to Sammy, and they embraced in that fake theatrical way, like she and Ricky used to do, giant smacks as if sealing lipstick on a tissue. One of Sammy’s eyebrows had smeared off, winging its way to join the dye in his hairline, and his face shone with a film of sweat so that he looked like a waxwork exhibit starting to soften.

‘Have a fabulous life, gorgeous,’ he said.

‘You too, gorgeous.’

Edith walked up the stairs and back onto the street, into a fierce, biting wind. No matter which way she turned, it felt as if she was being stung by a million tiny whips. Other people moved past her quickly, their heads bowed down in homage to the pavement, knowing exactly where they needed to be; Edith didn’t even know how to hail a taxi. She thought about Ricky, and what he might be doing at that precise moment. She could picture him standing in the wings during the dress rehearsal as he waited to time his entrance perfectly. One red dot painted in one corner of his eye, a white dot in the other, and thick black eyeliner adding to the whole eye-widening effect, so that he looked like a fearsome demigod—as terrifying as Kali—about to orchestrate more destruction on an unrepentant, undeserving world.

\* \* \*

When the text came through at 11:11, the first thing Edith thought of was Legs Eleven. A throwback to when she organised the bingo events at the retirement home. The second thing she thought was: What the hell are you playing at, Ricky?

For Ricky had once again cancelled on her. Alas, he couldn’t meet for lunch, but could she meet him instead at 4pm at Laughing Man Coffee in the Tribeca neighbourhood?

There he would give her the dress circle tickets for his opening night show.

*I can't wait to finally see you E!*

Seeing 'E!' on the small phone screen disturbed Edith. It had been years since she'd abbreviated her name to that, and now it seemed so ridiculous to shout out such a thing to the world, a childish squeak that could easily be lost in the wind.

Edith searched the address on her map and worked out that it would take her about half an hour to walk the distance, taking into account her sore Achilles heel and her terrible sense of direction. She knew she was running out of money fast, and couldn't afford to catch a cab. Soon she would be drawing down on her mortgage account, going backwards in this game of life. Funnily enough her parents hadn't thought this trip was a wasteful extravagance. Edith believed her mother had wanted this more than her, to boast to her friends that Edith was actually going somewhere, *off to New York to visit her famous friend!*

When it was time to leave to meet Ricky, Edith held her breath, and made her way to the elevators. The long, dark corridor was under-lit by small floor lights, which gave off a wan red glow like a bordello on a budget. It might have been a ploy to make the hotel seem cool and edgy, though Edith suspected it was really a way to cut down on cleaning costs: if you can't see the dirt, it doesn't exist.

She felt once again that sense of déjà vu—though not exactly a *lived* memory—more like she was walking through

her own dream sequence. And then she remembered what it was. Why, yes! All those times watching *Twin Peaks* with Ricky, once a week buying the doughnuts and then lying on his unmade bed in front of the small TV screen—in the days before Netflix and live streaming, when everything had to be timed and primed for an exact moment. She couldn't remember every detail of the show, even doubted whether there were hotels with dark, lonely corridors and dim lighting, but it was something more, wasn't it? An other-worldly glow flickering from the screen (beautiful actors, weirdly mashed narratives), Ricky *oob-abhing* about perfect cheekbones and lips, and the strangled light escaping from the bedside lamp, which Edith had smothered with a red-patterned scarf so that the colours bled through like the flesh of blood oranges. There were the two of them on the bed, stripped down to comfort, bare legs semi-entwined like crooked boughs on a tree—and that first taste of sugared doughnuts, so sweet and easy on the mouth, but then sticking heavily on the way down, a pebble in a gull's gullet, as you hear the words of your best friend, *Hey, what's that funky smell, Edith—is it your fanny or your feet?*

The elevator pinged open to reveal a group of guests inside, the kind of young people she had grown to expect at 11 Howard. And there were no children, something which she now realised was apparent about SoHo in general. No prams in the street, no harried mothers trying to schlep small children across busy crossings. Edith imagined that

this part of New York City was too expensive for most families, who were forced to live in more affordable boroughs further out from the heart of the city.

She wondered what these people did for a living. They could be techies, because that was where the money was now, certainly not in aged care. One girl had boyish clothes and her hair hurriedly scraped in a messy ponytail. Then there was an Asian boy with burgundy red-framed glasses, and another guy with shaggy, blonde-tipped hair—the type of hair wasted on a man. And they all stood in silence, a shared understanding that breathing in recycled air in a confined space was intimacy enough.

They arrived in the lobby and Edith quickly walked out, pushing open the heavy front door herself before the doorman could do so, another way to save a buck. It was still cold; though the bitter wind from the previous evening had died away, the sky remained a dismal grey, just like the great chunks of ice dotted with dirt and scuffed to the sides of the kerb. Edith walked past storefronts, slick cafés, and cheap diners with breakfast specials. Dead Christmas trees had been dumped on the sidewalks, their uppermost fronds creeping with brown. There was a pop-up shop on a corner that she had already wandered through on the first day in New York: separate stalls within the one giant space, an eclectic mix of crafts and fashion and second-hand goods all run by people a generation younger than herself. Here she had bought a felt bowler hat with a leopard-skin bow,

one which she wore now, even though she was too old for second-hand clothing. It just made her look like a bag lady, or worse, a sad clown with spools of wiry, coarse hair sticking out from her ears. *The texture of pubes*, the young hairdresser had informed her after dabbing extra brown dye along her hairline.

In one of the stalls Edith had also spied a pair of sparkly silver stilettos, and they reminded her of the shoes she'd bought for her graduation: red glitter shoes with killer heels, the sort that could pierce a heart. Both Edith and Ricky had planned their wardrobe, knowing that only the shoes would matter when the flotilla of black gowns and mortarboards sailed across the stage. But Ricky had bailed on her, didn't make the effort to attend something as boring and archaic as a ceremony, didn't even bother letting her know. And then, when the procession of shoes finally marched in front of the audience—mostly sensible courts and black lace-ups, except for Fabian's combat boots—when it was Edith's turn, clipping across in the shoes that didn't work without Ricky, she could have sworn that all her weight went bearing down into those two needle-sharp points, and that she would fall into the boards of the stage and disappear forever.

\* \* \*

Closer to Tribeca, the pedestrians thinned out, and the buildings seemed to grow statelier and more historic. The

streets looked cleaner too, with no dead, thrown-away Christmas trees, making Edith wonder if this was the Jewish end of town. She checked her destination on Google Maps and then scanned the street for any signs of the café. How odd. This should be the location of Laughing Man Coffee, but she couldn't work out where it was. She saw a couple walking past with a pram and decided to ask them.

‘Sure. You’re almost there,’ the woman said, pointing across the street.

‘Oh. Thanks.’

‘Australian, right? You’ll get your first decent coffee.’

Edith smiled. The family were obviously Australian too, though probably from the east coast, and knew how to dress for winter—impressive designer coats and scarves, and their infant child, a little pufferfish in a heavy-duty padded jacket and rosy apple-ball cheeks.

Edith thanked them and crossed the street. She saw two large women (Two Fat Ladies—88) sitting outside the café on upturned boxes sipping takeaway coffees, and another on the window sill of the next-door shop. Obviously the best place for coffee. But when Edith walked inside she was stunned to see that it wasn't a café at all, just a counter and two staff members working the espresso machines, shelves lined with merchandise and nowhere to sit, and a group of customers waiting in the small, cramped space for their orders. It didn't make sense that this was the chosen place for the momentous, long-awaited reunion.

And then Edith realised, with a stab of dismay, that Ricky hadn't intended staying to chat: it was merely the spot for the exchange of theatre tickets, as hurried as a drug deal drop.

Edith looked at the sign on the wall, a message of hope and altruism from the owner, Broadway and screen legend Hugh Jackman. She glanced at her watch, which showed that Ricky was already two minutes late. 58—*Make Them Wait*. Thought properly, for the first time, about how weird it was that she could never find out a thing about Ricky's play on the Internet and how the timeline of Ricky's successes had abruptly stopped eighteen years ago.

And then she heard the heralding sound of a new text coming in and she didn't need to read it to guess what it would say. 62—*Turn the Screw*. For Edith knew, suddenly, and with a cold, sharp clarity, that she and Ricky would never meet. She doubted that he was even in New York—was probably back in the brick and asbestos-lined suburbs of Perth, laughing while he played this cruel game with her.

But she deserved it, didn't she? For she had played her own wicked hand on Ricky: a series of terrible betrayals over the years. First, sleeping with Fabian straight after that awful graduation night, trying not to flinch when she saw the pale, scrawny self he revealed as he stripped off the gown, the coat, the boots, the beret, the glasses. And each time she met up with Fabian after that evening, it wasn't just

the ritual of coarse, jabbing sex, but their shared loathing of Ricky, becoming uglier and uglier in their comments and observations; and then in the later years taking this bitchiness online and infecting the other class members in the group chats with their mean spiritedness. But it was never ever satisfying for Edith. Not really. For after the first flush of guilty pleasure, she was left only with the nasty aftertaste of bile.

Edith ordered a flat white and waited with the other customers. She thought about all the conversations with Ricky about acting. How method acting only worked if you said yes to everything—too many noes closing down the scene. And that the whole point of Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* was to play a performer who could never really cut it on the stage. *See Edith, what people don't get is that Liza was never that good. She was only good at playing someone who was terrible... a mediocre B-grade performer.* Edith could see now that in the dying years of Liza's career, the only method acting she could summon up was tremulous befuddlement, essentially becoming her sad, old self.

When Edith's name was called out she stepped forward for her coffee ('Edie' was scribbled on the cup), then she went outside and walked along the streets until she found a beautiful classic brownstone with wide, welcoming steps. She tucked the wiry coils of hair behind her ears, adjusted the hat and tilted her head back, placing her tongue at the roof of her mouth, something which Ricky had taught her as

a way to create a better jawline. She took a selfie to photo-shop and post later on Facebook with the caption: *Staying in New York with the ever-fabulous Ricky. What a legend!*