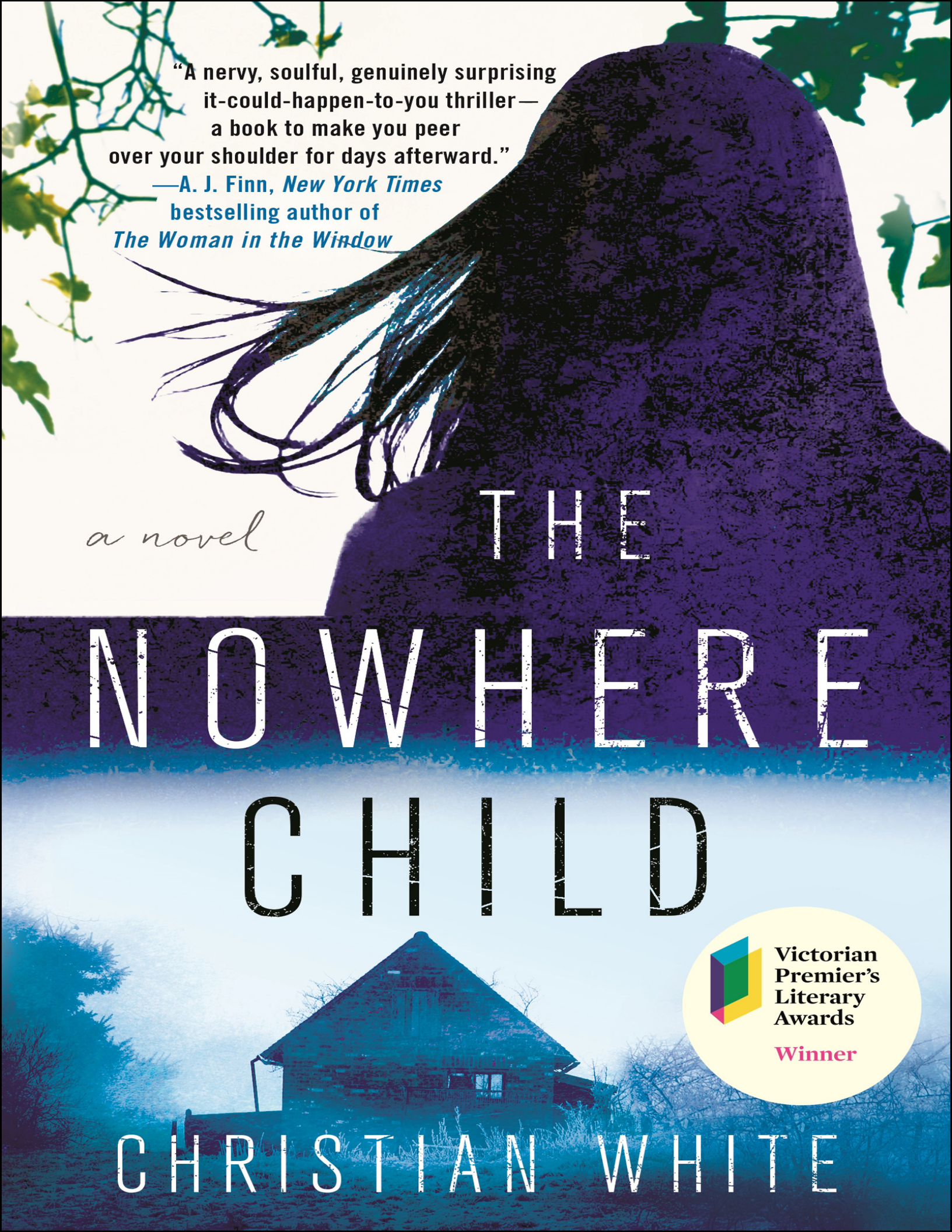
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For my parents, Ivan and Keera White.

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Now

‘Mind if I join you?’ the stranger asked. He was somewhere in his forties, with shy good looks and an American accent. He wore a slick wet parka and bright yellow sneakers. The shoes must have been new because they squeaked when he moved his feet. He sat down at my table before waiting for an answer and said, ‘You’re Kimberly Leamy, right?’

I was between classes at Northampton Community TAFE, where I taught photography three nights a week. The cafeteria was usually bustling with students, but tonight it had taken on an eerie, post-apocalyptic emptiness. It had been raining nearly six days straight but the double-glazed glass kept the noise out.

‘Just Kim,’ I said, feeling mildly frustrated. I didn’t have long left on my break and had been enjoying my solitude. Earlier that week I’d found a worn old copy of Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* propping up the leg of a table in the staffroom, and since then I’d been busily consuming it. I’ve always been a big reader, and horror is a particular favourite of mine. My younger sister, Amy, would often watch in frustration as I finished three books in the same time it took her to read one. The key to fast reading is to have a boring life, I once told her. Amy had a fiancé and a three-year-old daughter; I had Stephen King.

‘My name is James Finn,’ the man said. He placed a manila folder on the table between us and closed his eyes for a moment, like an Olympic diver mentally preparing to leap.

‘Are you a teacher or a student?’ I asked.

‘Neither, actually.’

He opened the folder, removed an eight-by-ten-inch photo and slid it across the table. There was something mechanical about the way he moved. Every gesture was measured and confident.

The eight-by-ten showed a young girl sitting on a lush green lawn, with deep blue eyes and a mop of shaggy dark hair. She was smiling but it was perfunctory, like she was sick of having her picture taken.

‘Does she look familiar to you?’ he asked.

‘No, I don’t think so. Should she?’

‘Would you mind looking again?’

He leaned back in his chair, closely gauging my response. Indulging him, I looked at the photo again. The blue eyes, the over-exposed face, the smile that wasn’t really a smile. Perhaps she did look familiar now. ‘I don’t know. I’m sorry. Who is she?’

‘Her name is Sammy Went. This photo was taken on her second birthday. Three days later she was gone.’

‘Gone?’

‘Taken from her home in Manson, Kentucky. Right out of her second-floor bedroom. Police found no evidence of an intruder. There were no witnesses, no ransom note. She just vanished.’

‘I think you’re looking for Edna,’ I said. ‘She teaches Crime and Justice Studies. I’m just a photography teacher but Edna lives for all this true crime stuff.’

‘I’m here to see you,’ he said, then cleared his throat before continuing. ‘Some people thought she wandered into the woods, got taken by a coyote or mountain lion, but how far could a two-year-old *wander?* The most likely scenario is Sammy was abducted.’

‘… Okay. So, are you an investigator?’

‘Actually, I’m an accountant.’ He exhaled deeply and I caught the smell of spearmint on his breath. ‘But I grew up in Manson and know the Went family pretty well.’

My class was set to start in five minutes so I made a point of checking my watch. ‘I’m very sorry to hear about this girl, but I’m afraid I have a class to teach. Of course I’m happy to help. What kind of donation did you have in mind?’

‘Donation?’

‘Aren’t you raising money for the family? Isn’t that what this is about?’

‘I don’t need your money,’ he said with a chilly tone. He stared at me with a pinched, curious expression. ‘I’m here because I believe you’re … connected to all this.’

‘Connected to the abduction of a two-year-old girl?’ I laughed. ‘Don’t tell me you came all the way from the States to accuse me of kidnap?’

‘You misunderstand,’ he said. ‘This little girl disappeared on April 3rd, 1990. She’s been missing for twenty-eight years. I don’t think you *kidnapped* Sammy Went. I think you *are* Sammy Went.’

★ ★ ★

There were seventeen students in my photography class, a mix of age, race and gender. On one end of the spectrum was Lucy Cho, so fresh out of high school she still wore a hoodie with *Mornington Secondary* emblazoned on the back. On the other end was Murray Palfrey, a 74-year-old retiree who had a habit of cracking his knuckles before he raised his hand.

It was folio presentation night, when students stood before the class to display and discuss the photos they’d taken that semester. Most of the presentations were unremarkable. The majority were technically sound, which meant I was doing *something* right, but the subject matter was largely the same as the folios in the previous semester, and the one before that. I saw the same graffiti on the same dilapidated brick wall; the same vine-strangled cabin in Carlton Gardens; the same dark and spooky storm drain dribbling dirty brown water into Egan River.

I spent most of the class on autopilot.

My encounter with the American accountant had left me rattled, but not because I believed what he said. My mother, Carol Leamy, was a lot of things – four years dead among them – but an abductor of children she was not. To spend one minute with my mother was to know she wasn’t capable of maintaining a lie, much less international child abduction.

James Finn was wrong about me and I was fairly certain he’d never find that little girl, but he had reminded me of an uncomfortable truth: control is an illusion. Sammy Went’s parents had learned that the hard way, with the

loss of a child. I had learned it the hard way too, through the death of my mother. She went suddenly, relatively speaking: I was twenty-four when she was diagnosed with cancer and twenty-six when it killed her.

In my experience most people come out of something like that saying one of two things: ‘everything happens for a reason’ or ‘chaos reigns’. There are variations, of course: ‘God works in mysterious ways’ and ‘life’s a bitch’. For me, it was the latter. My mother didn’t smoke or spend her working life in a textiles factory. She ate well and exercised, and in the end it made exactly zero difference.

See, control is an illusion.

I realised I was daydreaming my way through the folio presentations so I downed a cup of cold coffee and tried to focus.

It was Simon Daumier-Smith’s turn to show his work. Simon was a shy kid in his early twenties who spent most of his time staring at his feet when he talked. When he did look up, his lazy eye bobbed around behind his reading glasses like a fish.

He spent a few minutes awkwardly setting up a series of photos on the display easels at the front of the class. The other students were starting to get restless, so I asked Simon to talk us through the series as he set up.

‘Uh, yeah, sure, okay,’ he said, struggling with one of the prints. It escaped from his hand and he chased it across the floor. ‘So, I know that we were meant to look for, uh, juxtaposition and, uh, well, I’m not exactly sure I have, you know, a grasp of what that is or whatever.’ He placed the last photo on the easel and stepped back to let the class see. ‘I guess you could say this series shows the juxtaposition of ugliness and beauty.’

To my complete surprise, Simon Daumier-Smith’s photo series was … breathtaking.

There were six photos in total, each framed in the exact same way. He must have locked the camera off with a tripod and taken a photo every few hours. The composition was stark and simple: a bed, a woman and her child. The woman was Simon’s age, with a pockmarked but pretty face. The child was around three, with unnaturally red cheeks and a sick, furrowed brow.

‘I took them all over one night,’ Simon explained. ‘The woman is my wife, Joanie, and that’s our little girl, Simone. We didn’t name her after me, by the way. A lot of people think we named her after me, but Joanie had a grandma called Simone.’

‘Tell us more about the series, Simon,’ I said.

‘Right, uh, so Simone was up all night with whooping cough and I guess she was pretty fussy, so Joanie spent the night in bed with her.’

The first photo showed mother spooning child. In the second the little girl was awake and crying, pushing away from her mother. The third looked as though Simon’s wife was getting fed up with her photo being taken. The series went on like that until the sixth photo, which showed both mother and child fast asleep.

‘Where’s the ugliness?’ I asked.

‘Well, uh, see in this one, little Simone, ah, the younger subject, is drooling. And obviously you can’t tell from the photo, but in this one my wife was snoring like crazy.’

‘I don’t see ugliness,’ I said. ‘I see something … ordinary. But beautiful.’

Simon Daumier-Smith would never go on to become a professional photographer. I was almost certain of that. But with his plainly named series, *Sick Girl*, he had created something true and real.

‘Are you alright, Miss Leamy?’ he asked.

‘It’s Kim,’ I reminded him. ‘And I’m fine. Why do you ask?’

‘Well, you’re, uh. You’re crying.’

★ ★ ★

It was after ten when I drove home through the gloomy landscape of Coburg. Rain fell in fat, drenching sheets against the roof of the Subaru. Ten minutes later I was home, parked, and dashing through the rain toward my apartment building, holding my bag over my head instead of an umbrella.

The third-floor landing was thick with the smell of garlic and spice; the oddly comforting scent of neighbours I’d never actually met. As I headed for my door, Georgia Evvie from across the hall poked her head out.