

Holy



0:00
mum



Happy birthday dear Joanna, happy birthday to you!"

17 claps, and one to make me grow. *Little do they know how true that'll prove to be.*

Mum and Rory hand me a tall box wrapped messily using a combination of at least three different wrapping papers.

"C'mon Mum, one of these is from last Christmas." I groan sarcastically.

In spite of the mess I open the present slowly, carefully lifting up each sparingly placed piece of sticky tape, drawing out every ounce of anticipation possible before lifting off the wrapping.

My stomach drops – it’s a beautiful acoustic guitar, a Maton (and not a cheap one at that). I know because I’d been scouring the magazines for months now, tearing out pages and stacking them on my desk. I guess someone noticed.

“We figured you’d need something to learn on.” Mum blurts out. They are both grinning ear to ear and I can’t help joining them, despite the nagging thought at the back of my mind – *they don’t know*.

0:49 “Your guitar...”
me

“What?” I look up from my jaffle, spilling steaming hot baked beans onto my plate in the process. I hadn’t even realised Mum had come in, but she was leaning against the panelled timber wall at the bottom of the staircase. “Geez Mum, how long have you been there?”

“Your guitar, that was the gift” she repeated, as her gaze drifted through the window over the crashing waves towards the hazy horizon.

1:25 *They didn’t have to know, yet.*
mum

Mum is back in Perth now, but only for a couple more weeks. On the night of my birthday, when they gave me the guitar, I didn’t have the heart to tell her. She had only flown in for the weekend – just for me – and had to be at the airport ridiculously early the next morning. I couldn’t take away from that, right?

I wanted to tell Rory, I really did, but on the way home from the airport I couldn't even get a word in. He was planning this big surprise trip for mum when she got back home and he wanted me to come with him to test out some hiking and camping spots in preparation.

2:10 The sun is out with a vengeance today. Rory and I had torn ourselves from the comfort of the AC, leaving the minivan baking in a lonely carpark at the foot of the trail.

We had left the coast at the crack of dawn and wound our way through the tangled mess of roads that scarred the dense bush of the national park. I sat in the passenger seat sifting through the depths of Rory's famous tape collection, calling out the artist's names so he could keep his eyes on the road. Rory was always talking about how music was connected to places – both for the artists and the listeners. Apparently that's why he always needed to curate the perfect playlist for every drive. Which of course meant lots of digging around and switching out tapes as the mood shifted. On this particular morning though, I was more than thankful for the distraction.

2:19
me Nan had dozed off in the in the afternoon sunlight in her usual spot – feet up on the frayed and faded corduroy recliner.

Underneath the letters there's a sun-faded beige lunchbox that reluctantly unzips to reveal an assortment of old cassette tapes.

Some are comfortable in worn and cracked cases – while others lay naked, proudly displaying their magnetic strips. I rifle through a few; from Led Zeppelin to The Supremes, and everything in between. Most of the bands I have never even heard of.

Mum had snuck up on me again and was peering over my shoulder.

“I can’t believe it...”

She leans in and plucks out a cassette. It was unbranded, with only an unintelligible scribble on the outer shell to identify it. Mum was turning it over on her hands like she’d just unearthed a gold nugget.

“What does it say?”

2:27 *He must have noticed by now.*
mum

We stand in the shade of a stringybark guzzling water as sweat pools at our feet. There hasn’t been a breath of wind about for the whole hike. But just as we set off again on the steep winding trail, we begin to hear the rustling in the treetops, slowly working its way down to the bush floor like a dog shaking itself dry. Sweet relief so close!

Rory had been humming a melody from one of the tapes ever since we left the car. It was now thoroughly implanted in my brain, where it was interfering with a different intrusive thought...

They don't have to know, yet.

What they *didn't have to know yet* was buried at the bottom of the neighbours' wheelie bin, where I'd left them the night before – a trio of pregnancy tests.

It had been an accident, *sort of*. I wasn't drinking or anything, but I definitely wasn't thinking straight. You see, the surf championship was on at Bells and I had gone to watch and surf for a week during my term break at uni. After the competition on the first day, I was out in the lineup and this boy dropped in on me, almost knocking me off my board – talk about a meet cute. Anyway, one thing led to another and we ended up spending the week together. He was great – a Brazilian guy who was following the surf tour around the world. I'm still not sure how he could afford it. We spent the last night together and he was gone the next day – first to Perth and then to Spain, he'd said. I never saw him again.

As I round the next bend, the trees suddenly part – revealing a clearing with a large flat-topped stone at its centre. Rory was already sitting on the stone, facing away from me. I make my way up until I am standing at his side.

“Rory, there's something...”

“Just sit for a minute, kid.”

I had resolved to tell him everything, but for now I do what he says. The stone is hot to the touch – I can feel it burning the back of my thighs through my shorts.

“You know this is where we had our first date? If you wanna call it that. Your mum was still trying to get a handle on all the native plants and whatnot so I offered to drive her out here. She was a bloody nuisance to walk with though I tell ya. She'd stop every twenty paces to point out something or other, or take a cutting. We only just got up here as the sun was setting over behind the lake. Awesome sunset, very romantic of course, but we had turn around straight away to run back down the trail to make sure we didn't get lost in the dark.”

I glanced to our left only to be blinded by the sun reflecting off the lake – it was surrounded by bush on all sides and was only visible now that we'd reached the top.

“She did teach me a few things though – sometimes you just need to slow down, shut up, and let the bush sing. And there's no better place to do it than here I reckon.”

So we sit there in silence, for how long I don't know. I have the sense Rory is missing mum, but he doesn't say anything of course, and neither do I. Instead, we listen together to the creak of the tree trunks bending in the wind, and the far-off rustle of wallabies scattering through the undergrowth. So much life and movement, even in a moment of such stillness.

2:49 “It says ‘For Joanna (Guitar)’. Rory made it for me
me for my birthday.”

The far-off look in her eye tells me there is much more to it than that.

The fire had died down to embers now, so I made myself comfortable in Nan’s chair.

“You remember what I’ve told you about your dad?” Of course I do.

“Well, let’s just say I wasn’t too keen to tell your grandparents straight away...”

3:08 I told Rory everything. We sat together on that
mum warm stone talking while the sun made its way towards the lake.

Whatever you want to do, we’ll be there for you.
That’s what he kept coming back to.

I just wanted him to tell me what to do.

When we got back to the car, he rifled through the glovebox and pulled out a cassette – it had my name on it. “I made this for you... some songs you might want to start learning on guitar.”

I had completely forgotten about the guitar. My *guitar*. Waiting expectantly on my bed for me to return home, cradle it on my lap and create something new.

4:20 We listened to the tape over and over, the whole way home. We discussed the merits of each song and decided which one I'd have a go at first. Part of my burden had been lifted, and I was thoroughly enjoying ignoring the decision that was still looming over me.

Maybe it will all come to nothing anyway.

5:02
