

“Funny, honest and self-deprecating, this book  
is — above all else — deeply moving”

Sarrah Le Marquand, editor-in-chief  
of *Stellar* and *Body+Soul* magazines



A memoir about mental health and love

THIS IS NOT A  
LOVE  
SONG

AMBER PETTY

# CHAPTER ONE.

## GHOSTS OF AIRPORTS PAST

It's easy to waste a lot of time in Los Angeles staring at people and wondering if they're *someone*. It can be as stupid as losing 15 minutes on the five-foot-tall tanned dude in his 60s wearing a tangerine short-sleeve shirt, smoking a fag out the front of a cafe: *Hang on, did I see that guy on Seinfeld?* Or maybe it's the grey-haired guy in the white sneakers and trench coat, gliding at a suspicious pace through LAX like he might be trying to avoid attention: *Was that Richard Gere?* Five minutes later and along comes a blonde wearing a plain white T-shirt and jeans, moving fast and I think: *Wow. Was that Sharon Stone?* Then I realise: *Holy shit! That was Sharon Stone.*

It can pay off being alert in LA. It can also waste you a *shit-load* of time. Which is precisely what I was doing while queuing at the Burger King at LAX behind a tall, long-haired guy in a brown leather jacket (to be honest, my type). I wondered: *Is that the guy who just won American Idol?* My bloodshot eyes must have been burning lasers into his right temple because he suddenly looked over his shoulder. I whipped my eyes back up to the Burger King menu overhead. Back to my other

dilemma: *Will my hangover get better or way, way worse with a Whopper with the lot and, given I'm boarding in ten minutes, is this going to be the greatest mistake of my life, or just one of them?*

I go for the Whopper Junior and give up on my need to know the deal with the guy in front. It'd been a hectic week attending the Golden Globes after-parties (the perks of being a magazine columnist) surrounded by certified stars like Morgan Freeman and Halle Berry. I thought my fashion industry buddy Aaron, in town for G'day LA, was going to have a panic attack when I mentioned Debra Messing was standing a metre away. 'Oh. My. God. It's fucking *Grace!*' he shrieked loud enough to make me want to knee him in the groin.

My flight gate to Sydney was conveniently located in front of Burger King and I could see people starting to queue. Waiting for my order to be called out my eyes drifted to a little girl standing next to a guy in his early forties. The girl, who was eight or nine, was wearing a purple T-shirt with Dora the Explorer on it, denim shorts and a small silver backpack over one shoulder. Whatever the man was saying was making her giggle.

*I wonder if they're going on holiday together. Or maybe they've just finished one? Perhaps they're going home to her Mum?* I found myself getting lost in their moment, watching that magical connection between daughters and their dads.

'128? Order 128?' I swung away from the Burger King bench to retrieve the order I was already regretting. Bag in hand I sat down and began unpacking the burger I had three minutes to devour. As the taste of meat and melted cheese, mayonnaise and pickle filled my mouth and heart with joy, I looked back to where the girl and her father had been. She had her back towards me now so I couldn't see her face. Her Dad was stroking her hair lovingly, only stopping to plant kisses on the top of her head. And then he leaned down closer to her face and appeared to whisper. All of a sudden it hit me. This wasn't what I thought it was. *Oh, god, no. They're not saying goodbye, are they?* At that very second, she turned her head back into view as she looked up at her Dad. The smile that



had danced across her cheeks minutes earlier was gone. Now the man was kneeling in front of her. She put her head down, shaking it back and forth, crying. Like she was trying to make something go away. I wanted to vomit. I knew exactly the pain that little girl was in. I could feel it in every part of my body. That girl was once me. Memories from so long ago flooded back like it was yesterday.

I never understood why my dad chose to move from Melbourne to Sydney when my brother Myles and I were just two and three years old – or why he chose to live with another woman and her son. *Why did they get him, not us?* Divorce wasn't common in 1971 so it was hard not to feel different from other kids. There was no 'one week on, one week off' arrangement back then. We got short bursts with Dad. A couple of weeks during the year or when he came to Melbourne. It was never enough. I was obsessed with my dad. I thought he was the most amazing person in the entire world. I'd overhear people telling Mum we were better off never having lived with Dad so we didn't notice his absence. *You don't know what you're talking about*, I'd think. I missed Dad every day. Not that I recall it but Mum and Dad were still together for the first twelve months of my life before splitting when Myles was born. I never stopped wishing he lived with us.

In the early days of their divorce, while we were still toddlers, Mum would fly with us to Sydney so we could see Dad. Which must have been an absolute *shit* of a job. We were legally allowed to fly on our own when we were about four and five. People would stare as Mum would hand us over to the air-hostesses – the pity in their eyes only confirming to my young self that there was something wrong with us.

I credit those TAA and Ansett hosties for their kindness and, *God bless* them, always a promise of 'meeting the captain' and 'taking a look at the cockpit'. My brother loved it but it was always a 'no' from me. I had zero interest in seeing the one windscreen of the plane most likely to reveal a mountain seconds before our faces smashed into it. I'm sure some kids might have found flying a super fabulous and exciting adventure but not me. I hated every goddam second of it.

Once in our seats, strapped in tightly, my head would already be up in the clouds before the plane even left the runway. *What if Mum could tell how much I want to see Dad? Maybe she thinks I don't love her?* And so the game of emotional Twister would begin, fading only as the plane took off when, like clockwork, I'd turn white as a ghost and start sweating profusely. I'd then have about three seconds to grab the sick bag. The whole routine would leave my stomach muscles hurting for days. Only when I was one hundred per cent certain I was done, like squeezing the last of the toothpaste of the tube, would I hold my bag of shame out towards the aisle, waiting for a hostess to grab it like a baton in a relay race. There was not a single flight in my childhood that I didn't think we were going to die. And sometimes, when it was really bumpy, a deep wave of sadness would wash over me as I'd contemplate just how close we were to reaching Dad but weren't going to make it.

'Please fasten your seatbelts as we prepare for landing,' the pilot would announce. Rattled and relieved we'd have to wait for the grown-ups to get off before our hostess could walk us down the airbridge. Peddling fast, annoyed by my lack of sight in this land of giants, my heart would race at a million miles knowing my daddy was out there. Eyes darting left, right, trying to see past their backs, I'd search for his face. I loved the way Dad would be smiling even before he saw us. Our eyes locking, I'd charge as fast as I could at him, launching myself through the air and into his arms. Dad would scoop me up, swing me around, oblivious to the fact we might take someone's eye out with my shoe.

Dad always smelt like a delicious blend of Pierre Cardin aftershave and Rothmans cigarettes. Usually wearing a pair of designer shorts bought my stepmother, his fat wallet bulging from his back pocket, and an XXL long-sleeved polo shirt that looked like it'd been plucked off the floor seconds before racing out of the house.

With bags in tow the three of us would head for the car – Myles and I hanging off his big arms. Dad would swing us back and forth while we laughed hysterically. Once in the car Myles and I'd fight for body space

from the back, squish ourselves between the front seats, spill over on to the front console, and start chanting, ‘Harry, Harry, Harry’.

Harry Chapin was the man who wrote ‘Cat’s in The Cradle’ and (slightly) lesser hits like (our song) ‘30,000 Pounds of Bananas’ – the greatest song ever written. Two weeks later, on the way back to the airport, not even the lyrics of ‘30,000 Pounds of Bananas’, a song about an out-of-control truck driver spilling a load of bananas on to a slippery, wet road on the way to Scranton, Pennsylvania, was enough to lift the dread of saying goodbye. With dehydration and a flight announcement bringing me back to reality (and my hangover), I realised it had never occurred to me that other little girls all around the world might be doing the same airport goodbyes with their Dads. Shaking out of my time-travelling trance I promised myself, if the little girl was seated anywhere near me, I’d find something to say – anything that might break her out of the feeling I knew only too well. As we inched on board, I watched the passengers around me placing their bags overhead, slotting their belongings under the sleeves in front of them, bums plonking down on seats, and then, *24C, that’s me*. With my bags in the overhead locker, buckled in for the long flight, I was almost too scared to look. *What if she is near me? I’ve vowed to say something but what the hell am I going to say?* Nervously I turned around and there she was – just two rows back, sitting with her head down quietly weeping. I knew how this stuff went: *Hide your feelings. Don’t embarrass yourself in front of the adults. Wait for the tears to go.*

I sat contemplating my next move. As the aisles began to clear I decided I had nothing to offer except knowing her pain. So, I got up, crouched down next to her seat, and said, ‘*Hello sweetie, I just wanted to see if you were OK?*’ She looked up at me, wiping her tears away. ‘Oh yes,’ she said, trying to force out a smile.

‘I’m sorry, it’s OK, thank you.’

‘Have you just said goodbye to your dad?’ I asked, trying to be gentle.

‘Yes,’ she whispered, trying to be brave in front of the stranger.

‘Does your dad live here?’

‘Yes,’ she whispered.

‘And your mum lives in Sydney?’

‘Yes.’

I took a breath, trying to hide what I didn’t want her to see in her eyes – that once I was just like her and my pain was still there, raw as ever. I wanted her to believe one day all this *Dad stuff* would fade away. Something you grew out of like, *I hoped*, like vomiting into paper bags. I didn’t want her to know I still didn’t get it. That I didn’t understand the ramifications of it all and its effect on who I’d become. And then I came up with a *genius* idea! Or, perhaps, just an idea.

‘Wait there, sweetie. I’ve got something for you. I’ll be back.’ I moved back to my seat, grabbing all the crappy magazines I’d just bought, and returned to her seat.

‘These are just the silliest magazines and you probably won’t be interested in them but why don’t you look at the pictures? Just until you feel a bit better.’

*Just what a distraught little girl needs. A magazine full of celebrities she’s never heard of with headlines written by assholes with no conscience.* I hoped she was too sweet, too young, to get what they were saying. She just needed a distraction. I knew her tears would go at some point during the flight but I also knew they’d be back. Maybe even thirty years later, when you’re all grown up thinking you’re ever-so fucking fabulous, working for a magazine, on a flight home after attending the Golden Globes. I went back to 24C and stared at the seat in front of me. I closed my eyes, trying to block out the feeling welling up inside. When I opened them out rushed the tears, streaming down my face in perfectly straight lines – tears that’d waited a long time to run free. And then it hit me: *Oh, my god. I am so damaged.*

I couldn’t let her see me – not mid meltdown. I pressed my head hard against the chair so she wouldn’t see me. I didn’t want her to know that the pain she was in, saying goodbye to her Daddy, might follow her for as long, as I’d just discovered, it had in me.



Two hours later I got a tap on my shoulder. And there she was, this brave kid standing in the aisle next to me. ‘Thank you for your magazines,’ she said, now smiling.

‘Are you feeling a bit better?’ I asked, hoping my eyeliner wasn’t hinting I’d been having a few of my own issues over in 24C.

‘Yes, I’m OK now. Thank you.’

As she went back to her seat, I had a feeling she was going to be OK. For the rest of the flight anyway. She was learning the art of survival. But, as I knew only too well, distractions from pain won’t always be as harmless as a few trashy magazines.

## THE CARPET KINGDOM

As far as dads went mine was fun, funny and the most outrageously irresponsible man I’ve ever known. Even by seventies standards he was considered loose. And the problem with having a party boy Dad is everyone wants a piece of him. And when your piece is already too small it creates competition for his attention. Hanging out with Dad was never dull – he lived like it was his birthday every day. He didn’t believe in depriving himself of anything – sex (which didn’t mix well with marriage), gambling (see previous bracket), travel or food. The latter resulting in a large percentage of my time being spent with my father across a Lazy Susan discussing the merits of steamed dim sims v fried, and the unsung health benefits of a banana split. Despite his daily indulgences, Dad did work. In fact, he owned a relatively large business called The Carpet Kingdom which it appeared, if his Ferrari and our holidays to places like Dunk Island were anything to go by, did pretty well. I found out as an adult that this calculation was entirely off. Dad got his Ferrari after winning a ‘quaddie’ at the races and his business was mostly hanging by a thread until it went into bankruptcy in the mid-80s.

Someone convinced Dad in the late seventies that he should invest

in a TV commercial to advertise his business. The next thing we knew Dad was on TV wearing a red King's robe, a dodgy looking crown and holding a sceptre while he rattled on about his 'carpet empire'. Dad occasionally got recognised, which would embarrass the hell out of him. It embarrassed all of us – especially my stepmother Helen who Dad had met not long after arriving in Sydney. She was attractive, glamorous and not at all the type to go out with an overweight fake king. But Dad was funny and naughty, which most women loved. He was also a 'bloke's bloke' so men loved him too – even while he was making inappropriate remarks about their wives.

Myles and I loved going to work with Dad. We got to jump and climb all over his carpet rolls stacked high on the warehouse shelves despite the fact we could have been crushed at any second by a rolling shag-pile. Dad let us hang from the iron prong on his forklift while his showroom manager Barry raised us to the roof as high as the forklift would go – 'Don't tell your bloody mother,' they'd yell as our bodies dangled five metres above the concrete floor.

We ate pasties with tomato sauce, vanilla slices and drank lemon squash for lunch. It was a feast fit for a Carpet King and the heirs to his throne.

Mum struggled with us being with Dad. She stressed continuously about whether we were getting skin cancer (she was way ahead of her time on the SPF front), how fat we were getting (she had a zero tolerate policy on people over a size ten) or how close we were to dying – she knew Dad well. Thankfully she never found out. Mind you nor did we until many years later, learn Dad had nearly lost us on the Hawkesbury River one night. As the story goes, Dad and Helen left us sleeping on a clipper boat they'd rented for the weekend while they dined with friends at a restaurant on the river bank. At the claret and dinner mints end of the night one of their mates, who had their own boat and a child sleeping alone inside, pointed towards the river as a boat drifted slowly by, 'Oh fuck, is that one of ours?' They managed to stop us before we ended up in New Zealand. Here's the fascinating thing about the seventies

– people got really good at handling emergencies while completely shit-faced drunk.

It wasn't all fun and games with Dad – not when you're a highly sensitive, highly likely to vomit in moving vehicles, kind of kid. Dad rarely said 'no' to us but when he did it made life unbearable. From screeching up the mountain in his Ferrari around corners with no barricades and a hundred-metre drop into the forest, to smoking Rothmans on planes despite me turning broad bean green with his every exhale, Dad didn't like anything that got in his way of having a good time. In what we'll file under karma, his baby girl ended up growing up just like him. I was fourteen in 1984 when Dad and Helen decided to buy a pub in Narrandera in the NSW Riverina – what felt like the middle of goddam nowhere. They left behind their Sydney home (including a pool, a white pool table, and black leather and mirrored bar) and their entire social life. The decision seemed odd, especially for Helen. I could see the benefits for Dad – beer on tap, an in-house Chinese chef and the racing channel on 24/7 – but all Helen got was Dad.

I thought all my Christmases had come at once as I stood in the doorway of the storeroom at their new pub, like Howard Carter discovering Tutankhamun's tomb. I was staring at rows of bottles and cartons of cigarettes. All I could think of was how popular I was going to be if I could get some of it back to my friends. That was the thought process behind me taking several bottles of my favourite brands – Kahlua, Midori and Malibu (all your 80s classics) – along with one packet of each cigarette brand. It took me a couple of shifts to get it all back to my room, but I got there.

Things went pear-shaped when Dad stumbled across my handy-work the next day while I was out. Stupidly I'd left my stash in my suitcase sitting smack bang in the middle of my bedroom floor. When he went to move it out of the way with his foot, he discovered it was only slightly lighter than Ayres Rock.

An hour later I walked into Dad's room ready to flop down beside him on the bed. 'Hi, Daddy!' I said, joyfully. He was propped up against

a pillow with the racing form guide draped over his legs like a blanket – his signature spot. Dad looked up at me without speaking. Something was wrong. He'd never looked at me like he did on that day.

After a few painfully long seconds he said, 'So, can I ask you something?' He was squinting as though confused. 'When have you asked for something and not gotten it?' I didn't know what he meant. 'Um ... never?' I replied sheepishly a second or so before the penny dropped.

'So why is it that you feel you need to steal from us?' he said, now staring at me with his piercing blue eyes. I stood at the end of his bed, as shame filled my body. Steal? The word felt like a stab. I stared down at my feet not knowing what to say. I knew what he was talking about and yet, until that very moment, hadn't for a second thought about it that way. Helen walked past the doorway, stopping only to drop me a disdainful look before walking off. Dad waited for her to disappear before telling me they'd fought over her wanting to call the police. The police? Jesus Christ. I knew I'd been an asshole – but calling the cops? What Dad was yet to divulge was he hadn't won the fight entirely. He'd compromised by agreeing I be banned from returning or seeing him for twelve months. I was fourteen and, according to him, once I got on that plane, I wouldn't see him again until I was fifteen.

Not being allowed to see my dad for twelve months felt like a jail sentence. I don't remember much about the year that followed except that I made my first fake ID, went to my first nightclub and, according to Mum, it was the year I became an 'angry little girl'.

Eventually I turned fifteen, finally off the no-fly zone restrictions with Dad, when something else happened that I would not recall until three decades later. It was the day I heard through the school grapevine that Dad was in town. According to these little whispers my dad was staying at his best friend's house, just five minutes from my house. It got back to me via a group of girls at school that included Dad's best mate's daughter, all celebrating the 'hysterical night' they'd had the night before with 'Uncle Ian'. AKA my dad. At first I couldn't believe

it was true. I spent the rest of the school day trying to suck back my humiliation and rage, counting the minutes until I could get home and learn the truth.

That afternoon I came through the back door at home like a tornado, throwing my schoolbag down on the kitchen floor. Mum was standing in the doorway from the kitchen to the front hallway. 'Did you know Dad's in town?' I spat, through a tight jaw. I distinctly recall the expression on her face as my eyes bore through her skull as I awaited her response. She looked sad and a little terrified. I was scary. I was in the first year of my new scary self.

Mum started looking up Dad's best friend's phone number. 'I'm going to ring him,' I spat, as she handed me a post-it-note with the number on it. I charged off towards the phone outside my bedroom door. My heart was pounding under my school jumper as I snatched the phone receiver, my finger stabbing each hole, dragging the numbers around forcefully, trying to calm my breathing with each excruciatingly slow dial return. 'Hello!' came an answer from the wife of Dad's best friend. Trying to sound polite and unperturbed I replied, 'Hi. It's Amber. Is my dad there?' *Please say no, please say no, please say no.*

There was a brief pause before she answered, 'Yes, darling, I'll put him on!' I wanted to smash the receiver against the side of my head.

A minute later Dad picked up. 'Hello?' he said as if surprised.

'Dad? So, you are in Melbourne?' I said trying to mask my fury and my disappointment. He sounded nervous. I, however, sounded like a cop who'd just pulled over a P-plate driver doing twenty kilometres over the speed limit. I wanted to sound disconnected, business-like, grown-up.

'Yes, darling. I was just about to ring you,' he said, sounding pathetically upbeat.

'And when did you get here?'

Like a kid about to lose his license he sheepishly replied, 'Last Tuesday.'

He'd been around the corner for almost a week.

‘And when are you going back?’ I said, still determined to keep my cool.

‘Tomorrow, but I can see you tonight?’ he replied, hopefully. I slammed the phone down and dropped to the ground like a three-year-old. I bashed my fists onto the carpet until my wrists hurt. I cried and screamed words Mum let me get away with for a day.

## DING DONG THE BITCH IS DEAD

It’s funny when you’re young how you’re acutely aware when your mother’s footsteps sound a little ominous. Particularly after a phone call you didn’t manage to eavesdrop on, and I did pride myself on eavesdropping on most. I was used to being on high alert when the phone rang in our house – a habit I formed as a child waiting for Dad to call. It was a chilly winter’s day in the middle of my Year Ten school holidays when we received an unexpected phone call from Mrs Turner, my school principal. She was calling to confirm whether or not I was returning to school the following semester.

‘Of course she’s coming back. Why wouldn’t she be?’ my confused and perhaps slightly naïve Mother responded.

‘Well, we just think it might be best if she didn’t return here. We think it might be time you looked for somewhere else for Amber to go. We feel we’ve tried our best with her and it hasn’t worked out,’ the principal said flatly.

Next minute I hear Mum yell, ‘Amber, are you there?’ I was cross-legged on my bed with my stereo on my lap, hard at work taping my favourite songs from Casey Kasem’s American Top 40 while trying to clip out his voice. Stop, start, rewind, record – there was an art to this shit.

Now Mum was at my door, left hand on hip.

‘Amber, do you have any idea why Mrs Turner might have just called me wanting to know if you were returning to school after the holidays?’ she enquired.



Click, stop, button-down. I rolled my eyes, pissed off I hadn't got to fully record my song, dreading what my intuition told me was not the principal doing a housekeeping ring around on every student at school.

'Nope, no idea,' I answered, trying to sound calmly curious.

'Well, that's the phone call I've just had, and she made it pretty clear she doesn't want you back. What exactly has been going on at school that I don't know about?' she asked.

This was a bit of a tricky one as there might have been a handful of things that had gone down which hadn't entirely made it onto Mum's radar. Mind you, a couple had gotten uncomfortably close. Like the time two rival ratbags at school tried to frame my mate Sabrina and I for sending death threats (I mean, please). Mrs Turner found out after the terrified recipient and her mother brought the letter to her attention. Sabrina and I were immediately hauled into the principal's office and warned that if we didn't come clean by the end of the week, she'd be calling our parents to notify them of suspension. The little bitches behind the letter eventually buckled under mounting pressure from our small but persuasive group of supporters and confessed with about an hour left of the week. I'd also managed to wriggle out of getting busted for selling drugs at school that year after my sports teacher found a suspicious aluminium parcel in the bag of a Year Ten student. I'd made a whopping \$15 that week palming off dried rosemary that I may have implied was marijuana. Obviously, there'd been a sprinkling of other incidents that had somewhat cemented my reputation as a nasty little piece. And yet up until Mrs Turner's phone call that day I'd also been in the rather gifted position of my brother making an even bigger asshole of himself at his school, which provided me with the perfect smokescreen.

I was just shy of turning sixteen which I guess is quite old for a feral cat at an Anglican Girls Grammar School. It was time for a fresh start. Conveniently I had it in my head that maybe, given I was so close to being an adult anyway, it might be time I got on with the job of life after education. That, however, was not what Mum had in her head, 'Your

dad and I have decided we're not wasting another cent sending you to a good school so that you can sit around being a smart ass all day.'

I didn't like the sound of that. For all my disdain for authority and a boring private school education I most certainly was not ready to get among it at the local high school. I didn't want to be dealing with girls I hadn't had time to scope out and plan a strategy around and I was definitely not ready to share a classroom with the opposite sex.

'We're going to have to try and get you into Brighton High School and see if they'll take you at short notice.' Short notice? I don't want them to notice me full stop. In my mind, Brighton High was where all the bogans went to school and I didn't particularly want my name mentioned in the same sentence, let alone be wearing the same uniform. *I cannot go to this school. I will not go to this school.* I'd been told I had 'a reputation' over at Brighton High for being a little too big for my roman sandals.

The crazy thing was that prior to high school, on my last day at primary school, there'd been a whole gang of us who'd clung to each other howling like babies that we were leaving each other. There were just three of us going to the local private school instead of Brighton High and yet one year later the old gang suddenly shunned us in the streets and branded us 'snobs'. The little bastards turned on us like cut snakes, regardless of whether our mum's bought Black & Gold versus Birdseye fish fingers – which to me said everything about whether your family was rich or poor. So eventually I just played the role I'd been bestowed with – some might say a little too well.

Mum believed if she sent my brother and I to private schools we'd have, as she put it, 'a better shot at life'. But the reality was I'd entered my private school on day one with a raft of insecurities that ranged from being from a divorced family to not being pretty enough and not rich like I assumed everyone else's parents were. I decided my only strategy for saving myself from potential social annihilation would be to present a side of me that would be too intimidating to call out. Which served me well-*ish* for four years until Mrs Turner decided to give me the flick.

After much debate, not with but about me, Mum announced she'd

found a new school. One that was ‘public’, and uniquely, as she PR-ed it, ‘an all-girls school’. Proudly adding that the school had a ‘surprisingly good reputation’ with regard to education. *A surprisingly good education?* As if that was a necessary consideration. The only hiccup, according to Mum, was it was just out of our catchment zone so they didn’t have to take me. But why wouldn’t they? I mean, I’d just been asked to leave school mid-year, I came armed with grades ranging in the Ds, Es and Fs, not to mention a report card that, if held close to your ear like a shell, echoed the faint cries of my exhausted teachers. I guess it didn’t help my cause that on the day of our appointment with the new school’s principal I’d arrived wearing my ex-private school uniform. There was nothing accidental about my look; the message was simple, ‘Fuck you.’

I was polite enough as Mum and I introduced ourselves before sitting down in front of the principal’s laminated, fake wood desk. After about ten minutes of the adults crapping on about stuff I didn’t catch, it was suggested I leave the room. Apparently the principal needed to have a ‘private chat’ with Mum. Guided to a chair outside her office I settled in for what I hoped would be minutes countable on one hand, before we’d leave and never return. Class was in session so the halls were quiet aside from the occasional girl wafting past at seemingly regular intervals, each one glancing my way as my eyes burned back at them. I wasn’t embarrassed (or aware how delusional I might’ve looked) that I was outside the principal’s office in my old uniform – because I’d never see anyone in that building again.

Back inside the most unglamorous office I’d ever laid eyes on the principal spoke to my mum, ‘As you know Mrs Petty, Amber lives outside this jurisdiction so we are not obligated to take her. And, unfortunately, with her current grades and her teachers’ comments I am concerned about what the issues are with Amber.’

‘Yes, I understand,’ Mum began her carefully thought-out speech. ‘You know she was actually always such a good student and loved school prior to the last year or so but she’s sadly taken my divorce from her Dad quite hard.’

Back out in the foyer, the bell blared overhead, sharply followed by the eruption of voices and the sound of hundreds of chair legs scraping across classroom floors.

*For Christ sakes, Mum, hurry the fuck up,* I thought to myself, uncomfortable at the prospect of a sea of high school girls about to spew forth from all directions. There was only so long I could keep my face locked in a snarl. I could hear Mum's favourite piece of advice ringing in my ears, 'Don't do that. You'll give yourself wrinkles.'

In the only highlight so far of that day, Mum suddenly appeared in the foyer, surprisingly upbeat, if not just for show, as she farewelled the woman she was hoping had fallen for her charms. There wasn't much hope she'd fallen for mine. We politely thanked the lady for seeing us then swiftly headed out to the car.

Once inside Mum's yellow Celica, as I attempted to say nothing, Mum proudly announced she believed the '*slight creative license she'd been forced to take*' with the principal regarding, as she recounted – '*why you're such a problem*' – appeared to have had an empathetic reaction from her prey.

'I just explained you used to be a good student but had struggled since your Dad and my divorce.'

'*What?* Did she ask you when you two actually broke up?' I enquired.

'No, no, I just gave the impression that it had been in the last couple of years. She didn't specifically ask when, so it's fine.' She had that air of getting one over and, even better, one over me. God knows she revelled in that shit. *Wow, she's good,* I mused to myself, praying her intuition was as off as her grasp of the truth.

As it turned out Mum had been on her A-game that day and as term three began so too did my new chapter at a school I was convinced I'd never return to. The vain side of me, however, was at least excited about the colour of my new uniform given I'd just spent four and a half long years in army green and American military brown uniform. Not exactly colours that help an already self-conscious girl feel like Kelly Le Brock in *Weird Science* (AKA, the hottest thing to come out of 1985).

I was totally on my own in a school that had more subgroups than the archives of a decade of 80s music. We had The Wogs who proudly referred to themselves as such and who didn't want me and appeared to passionately loathe every molecule of my being. I'd never been subjected to so much hate in my life. Well, I had, but in the safe space of my last school. This lot would sit huddled together on the cricket pitch in the middle of the oval, dragging away on their Winnie Blues, and yell at me, 'Oi, come over here so we can cut off those little ringlets of yours.' Those girls scared the absolute *shit* out of me.

Next up we had The Head Bangers. Again, not my label. This was an accepted title embraced by the girls themselves. They stared intensely at me through heavily made-up eyes. *Maybe, I prayed, if we couldn't bond over their terrible choice of music we'd bond over a mutual understanding of the spiritual importance of hairspray?* I mean, values are at least important, aren't they?

The Bogans – the only group who appeared to have been given their title by all other groups – were quite unaffected by my presence. This I found particularly curious given I'd assumed they'd be the first lot to want to ram my forehead into a locker.

And finally, The Trendy girls – my closest demographic – they made it crystal clear I was categorically not welcome under any circumstances. Unbeknownst to me they'd made a pact to shun me as much as humanly possible. While I was clueless as to why I did suspect it might just have been a classic case of my shit catching up with me.

My new school became such an incredible whirlwind experience as I received a crash course in what would form the foundation of my social beliefs about myself and others. In a divine curve-ball, the first people to show me kindness at my new school were the bogans. With so many teenage girls from varying socio-economic backgrounds vying to find and make their tribes I became fascinated by all that was going on around me. It all felt so authentic in a way I'd never experienced before. And, despite at times feeling like Sissy Spacek with a bucket of blood over her head at prom night, I was finally awake.

Speaking of awake, it's hard not to be when you've just received a

threatening, anonymous note in class outlining that the author knows where you live, how you travel home, and stating they're going to meet you somewhere halfway to 're-arrange your pretty little face'.

Clearly designed to rattle my ex-private school cage and my sense of worth I do remember as I read those three little words, pretty little face, that I felt a surprising pang of joy: *Do they think I'm pretty? Shame about the bashed head. A compliment delivered by a poison arrow. How totally Snow White? Or was it Cinderella? Whatever.*

As I was reading the note that had been thrown on the desk in front of me as a cluster of girls brushed past me on their way to their seats my face must have revealed I was digesting something more sinister than the sleeve notes to a Madonna single. One of the bogans sitting in the row of seats in front of me looked back and asked, 'Hey, what's that?'

I hesitated before handing the note over, trying to remember what a new cast member on the TV show Prisoner would do in my position. The letter had been creatively written and designed with blood droplets in red biro, dripping off every other word.

Before I could work out what my lone, new girl strategy was going to be on death threats, the bogan in front of me stood up in front of the class, not a brass razoo about our poor maths teacher keen to get stuck into Pythagoras' theorem and a couple of pie charts. She shouted, 'Hey, who's the fuckin' idiot that wrote this letter to Amber?'

There was silence.

'Well, we're not fuckin' going anywhere until the person that wrote this shit stands up right here, right now.' I was gob-smacked. This amazing girl who I'd never spoken a single word to was holding the entire class hostage until the red biro bandit came forward.

The teacher, astoundingly, remained with her back against the blackboard, like a warden in the middle of a prison outbreak, meekly protesting, 'C'mon girls, this is silly, who wrote this to Amber?' She'd lost control of the room. My bogan angel was like Angelina in Maleficent, determined to take the anonymous dragon down with her verbal and energetic chains, threatening to wrap them around her neck. Finally



the author piped up. It was the headbanger in the second row from the front. She swung her body around towards us, and snapped, 'I *fuckin*' wrote it, so what? She's a *fuckin*' bitch.'

'Is that right Helen, and what makes her a fuckin' bitch?' My angel shot back while the rest of the class risked whiplash as their heads went from player to player.

'She's come from this *fuckin*' bullshit school, and she lives in *fuckin*' Brighton. She's only *fuckin*' here cause she got kicked out of her other school,' she said, looking furious.

It was like a tennis match and I was the fresh, furry Slazenger ball. Here was this stranger sticking up for me in what might have been me versus the head banger community of Australia. My bogan angel looked her opponent straight in the eye and warned, 'You touch her outside of this classroom, and you'll have to deal with me.'

Axel Rose's cranky girlfriend backed down, shaking her head as she turned away from us, and muttering profanities under her breath. I stayed quiet, taking in an event that I didn't deserve. I didn't deserve my bogan angel. What I deserved was to hear the school bell ring, feel sick with panic knowing I'd have to get home not knowing when my headbanger might come for me. Like a game of Cluedo. What would her weapon be? The candlestick? The knife? The revolver? A Guns N' Roses boxset?

Another revelation came to me in the days after that death threat arrived on my desk. Despite the fact I'd viewed this school in such stark contrast to where I'd come from there were similarities I couldn't ignore. Although the sub-groups or cliques were more pronounced than at my last school, both had girls with innate personal power willing to step ahead of the pack. And it dawned on me I'd used my own personal power to manipulate others in order to protect myself while the girl who'd taken on the headbanger had used hers to protect someone else. This school that I had so hugely dismissed as being of no value to me actually changed my life right when it needed it. And, for the record, I never saw that girl who protected me once I left school but I do

remember her name. Her name was Susan and she changed the course of how I would forever treat those that don't look like me, or live like I do. To use words that honour her appropriately I say: What a seriously, fuckin' cool chick.

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This Is Not A Love Song

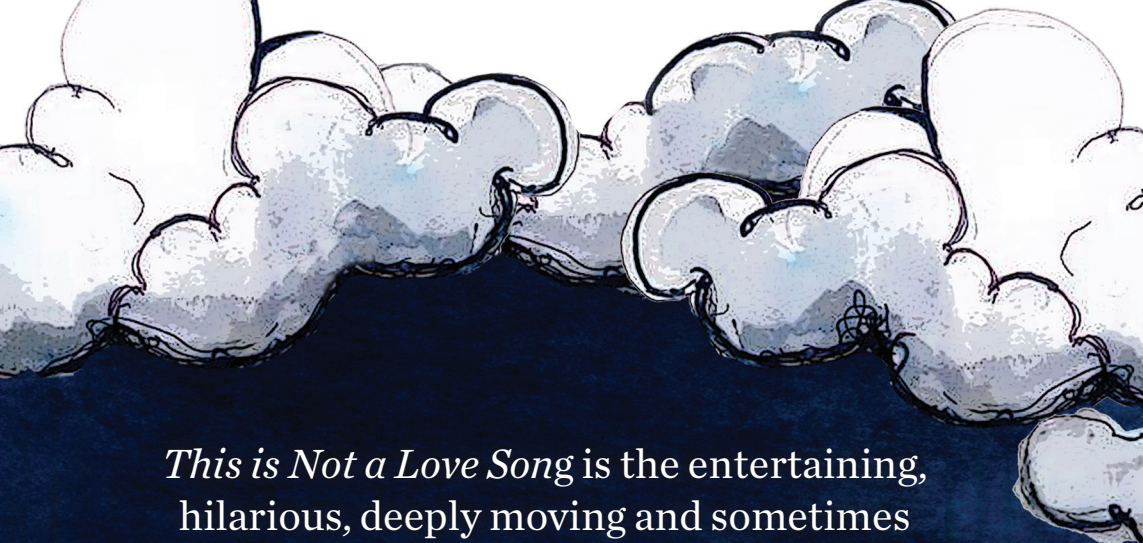
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*This is Not a Love Song* is the entertaining, hilarious, deeply moving and sometimes harrowing true story of Amber Petty's life.

Amber's life looked pretty amazing from the outside. 'Dream' jobs in magazines, a gig hosting a popular breakfast radio show, a bestie who found — and married — a Danish prince. Even a stint on *Survivor*. Who wouldn't want that kind of life?

Behind the scenes Amber's life was in turmoil. Those magazine colleagues tried to use her for 'Mary gossip'. Her love life fell apart so dramatically that she found herself fearing for her life, more than once, and the toxic pressures of life working in commercial breakfast radio became unbearable.

The icing on the cake came via a 'gotcha call' set up by her radio co-host. Amber soon found herself immersed in what seemed like a beautiful, yet tragic love story. But once more things were not really as they appeared. When Amber eventually uncovered the appalling truth of the situation, she was forced to put herself under the microscope to find out why she kept attracting so many smiling assassins. And, perhaps more importantly, why she'd allowed them to stay.

