

# **Hungry Ghosts: A Novel**

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## ABSTRACT

'Hungry Ghosts' is an account of thirty-six hours of a young woman's life following her arrival in Singapore. Sarah, the protagonist of the novel, is accompanying her partner Paul on a business conference. It is increasingly apparent that Sarah's motives for leaving her home town, Adelaide, have more to do with her need to escape than her commitment to Paul. A room in an international hotel offers Sarah the comforts of a cocoon, where signs of previous occupation and ties to the past are erased on a daily basis. But Sarah is obviously dislocated from her surroundings, which are in turn out of step with the external environment: the air-conditioning is freezing; the orchids are plastic and nod in an artificial breeze. In this sterile environment Sarah is troubled by flashbacks of what she has left behind.

Sarah begins to emerge from her cocoon, venturing into a big city that, for her, could be anywhere. She recognizes places generic to big cities as well as a few unique landmarks, becoming aware of the continual and universal tensions of progress and the past. In this way the novel becomes a study of the role of memory, ghosts and the absent dead, all of which play a part in informing Sarah's present and her understanding of the future.

At the hotel Sarah encounters a group of war 'pilgrims'. A mother, her son Bradley and an elderly British Army Major are all on a 'pilgrimage', and, in their different ways, all trying to make peace with the past and its insatiable ghosts. As Sarah learns their stories and witnesses the battles they wage, she is forced to challenge her own beliefs about being able to leave traumatic events behind. Her absent mother haunts her on the sun-drenched streets of fast-moving Singapore. A bond begins to form between herself and Bradley who, like Sarah, has been left out-of-whack by a recent calamity.

'Hungry Ghosts' explores several dualities: the claims of the past, both cultural and personal, balanced against the demands of the future; private memories that must be reconciled with the demands of public living and progress; the world of the mind that is dependent on the physical body occupying 'real' space. The novel examines the strangely transitory spaces that people can find themselves in: the liminal areas of grief, travel,

dislocation, the unfamiliar. It asks why, in an age of globalisation, the claims of place, and in particular of home, remain so strong.

My exegesis, written as three essays, addresses three aspects of my manuscript, 'Hungry Ghosts'. In the first essay I look at the importance of 'place' in my novel, and the different types of 'places' I explore. In the second essay I look at how contemporary theories on war commemoration, coupled with my own research and witnessing of 'actual' events, have informed my depiction and treatment of the theme of war memory. In my final essay I reflect on the role mourning has played in the development of my manuscript, considering both the challenges it has presented to my narrative and the ways in which it has strengthened it.

## DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date 14.7.09

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## HUNGRY GHOSTS

A tour party was laying siege to the foyer. A phalanx of people in red baseball caps lined the granite bunker of the reception desk, holding up passports and folded pieces of paper as if trying to get on board a departing ship. Behind them a trail of unattended cases lay scattered across the slate floor. Sarah, picking her way through, was reminded of a scene from a disaster movie, a shot of a luggage-strewn empty street where fleeing individuals had dropped everything and run. The scene was reflected in the brass ceiling hanging oppressively low, like the roof of a warming oven, over the space: a cluster of red dots huddled in the corner, Sarah's wraith-like form morphing across the bronze panelling behind them. Raised voices ricocheted like bullets off the beaten metal.

Sarah stopped at the information rack in the corner of the foyer, staring at the jumble of brochures showing competing Singapore sights: white stone buildings and red-sailed sampans and golden Buddhas. Icy air droned from a vent above the rack, making the brochures nod like bulrushes in the breeze. The chilled current trickled heavily down Sarah's face and bare arms and she hugged herself, trying to fight off the jetlagged numbness in her limbs.

*Paul wants info about duty-free electronics, she thought dopyly. And I need a map.* She rifled through a wad of grey recycled brochures labelled 'PEACE'.

A man strode rapidly past the rack, his bulky form generating its own counter-current; the slumped pamphlets stood momentarily erect. He walked into the alcove beyond the foyer and stopped at the entrance to the ladies' bathroom. "Mo-ther..." He rapped lightly on the door.

A second, much older man walked slowly past Sarah. "I have the salt, Bradley." His voice cracked on *salt* as though escaping through a flaw in his windpipe.

“Mum.” The younger man knocked more firmly on the door. “Mum, Major Willard got you some salt.”

“I’m sure it will help.” The older man shuffled to an awkward halt behind the younger one.

“It won’t if she won’t come out to get it.” The younger man leaned awkwardly against the lintel, wrapping his arms across his chest so a thick paunch of yellow shirt burst through the front of his jacket. His face was round and pasty and reminded Sarah of something a bored baker might have made in a lump of dough, his eyelids sagging over olive pupils, his mouth strips of capsicum ringed by poppy-seed stubble. “Mum...” He cupped his hands and yelled through the door, his English accent fuzzy on the timber.

“Are you OK?” Sarah asked.

The young man pivoted around. “Fine, love, how are you?”

“Oh, I just thought, um...It sounded like your mum needed help.”

His mouth twisted in a grimace. “Yeah, she does. Professional help.”

The older man’s head turned slowly towards Sarah, his mouth agape like a sideshow clown. She could almost hear the gears creaking as he raised his face to look at her, the rims of his eyes swelling behind bifocal lenses. “Well, maybe we could enlist the help of this young lady.”

“Ey?” Baking spots appeared in the younger man’s pasty cheeks. “Oh, Major, let’s just leave it, OK? Let’s go back and finish our drinks.” He turned his back on Sarah, spreading a broad hand across the Major’s thin shoulder. “Mum will come out soon. There’s no force on earth that would make her miss her dinner.”

“Look, if you need a hand with something...” Sarah said.

“Ah, good girl. Yes, we do.” The Major nodded.

“No, we don’t.” The other man spoke through clenched teeth, his voice squeaking like air from a deflating balloon.

“We were having a pre-dinner drink. We’re all about to go out. And Bradley spilt some wine on his mother’s shirt.” The Major stepped around Bradley.

“Accidentally.” Bradley stuck his hands in his trouser pockets and leaned against the wall, his gut poking out like a tongue.

“And I thought she might want to use some salt to try to get the stains out.” The Major slipped his hand into the pocket of his baggy navy blazer, pulling out a salt shaker.

“Major...” Bradley said.

“Please, call me Tom.”

Bradley tapped the wall with the sole of his scuffed Doc. “*Tom*, the stain’s not that bad. Really, she’ll end up doing worse to herself at tea...”

“Well, we’ll get her to hang on to the salt then.” The Major spluttered a cough across the shaker, misting up the glass vial. “Now, dear, if you could deliver this to Bradley’s mother and let her know all she needs to do is sprinkle a bit of salt on the mark, rub it in a bit, and rinse. Maybe do that a couple of times over.” He tilted the shaker towards Sarah, dusting the air with salt.

Sarah reached for the shaker, trying to avoid touching the flecks of spittle on the glass.

“I just don’t see it as improving mum’s mood,” Bradley said, “having a random Australian barge in on her bearing salt.”

*She’ll probably just be glad it’s not you*, Sarah thought. “So, the mother, ah, the lady in there, she just needs to sprinkle, rub and rinse?”

“That’s it. Good girl.” The Major rubbed his thumb on the back of his hand, massaging swollen purple veins, patches of grey flesh. “Sprinkle and rub and...” He coughed again and tugged at his tight collar, trying to liberate a saggy piecrust of skin.

“And her name is Carol, by the way.” Bradley said.

“Pardon?”

“The *lady* in there.” His voice twisted ironically on the word. “Her name’s Carol.”

“Carol.” Sarah nodded stiffly.

“Yeah.” He chuckled suddenly, his eyes softening, smoke blue rings appearing around the black holes. “As in Christmas.”

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A wave of panpipes and air-conditioning broke over Sarah as she walked into the bathroom waiting area. The alcove looked like a theatre dressing room, the walls lined with mirrors trimmed with golden bulbs, each brilliant border making the encased glass dark as mud. In the dim panes Sarah’s reflection looked dyed in sepia, her arms the colour of baked baguettes, her exposed ring of stomach tinged like a meringue. Her face reminded her of the shrunken heads she’d seen in a museum in Adelaide, parched skulls with yolk-yellow skin and shocks of frazzled dark hair.

A hand dryer whined out of the neighbouring chamber, cutting through the panpipes like a drill. Sarah walked into the bathroom and saw a woman standing in front of the roaring unit, holding a billowing yellow shirt under the vent. “Carol?”

Carol glanced up. “Oh!” She threw the shirt across her chest, covering her lilac bra. “You startled me.”

“Oh, sorry...” Sarah looked away, embarrassed.

“I didn’t hear you come in.” Carol gave a nervous laugh. “I’m not in the habit of undressing in public bathrooms. I’m just trying to get a mark out of my shirt.”

“I know, your son said...” Sarah looked down at the floor as the other woman swung her shirt over her shoulders.

“My son?”

“Um, yeah.” Sarah focused on the pattern of black and white tiles on the floor. From the corner of her eye she could see a reflection of Carol dressing, a fleshy white arm getting sheathed in linen, a breast jiggling like a cat in a purple bag. “I met him in the corridor.”

Carol stared at her. “He’s out in the corridor?”

“He asked me to come in and find you.”

“Oh, for the love of Mary.” Carol flicked her grey bob over her collar. “They say your children will have periods of separation anxiety, but they don’t say it will keep happening when they’re forty.”

The chequered pattern of floor tiles swam and reformed like an Escher illusion, turning into stacks of black cubes on a white backdrop, white cubes stacked on black. “He wanted me to give you some salt. He thought it would help lift the wine that he’d ah, accidentally spilt on you.”

“Oh, really? He thought a bit of salt might lift this, did he?” Carol held out the rumpled right flank of her shirtfront.

Sarah looked at the stain, round and thick like a crimson bullseye. “Oh, wow.”

“Indeed.” Carol sniffed.

“Maybe if you get the salt on it straight away...” Sarah walked over to the sink.

“Hmmm.” Carol sighed. “Think I’ll just have to keep my jacket on. And hope we pitch up somewhere air-conditioned for dinner.” She glanced at her wristwatch, clicking her tongue. “Which we’re going to be late for, I think.”

“Look, if you want to have a quick go with the salt, I can give you a hand. We can scrub a bit each.”

“Oh, love, well...” Carol’s eyes widened. Her irises were the same smoky blue colour as Bradley’s. “I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“No trouble. I..” Sarah shrugged. “I’m fresh off a plane and trying to find ways to keep myself awake.”

“Fresh off a plane?” Carol slipped off her shirt and laid it across the sink. The bright light above the basins turned the stain the colour of dried blood. “Are you from Australia?”

“Yes.”

Carol walked over to the chrome receptacle and grabbed a couple of rolled towels. “One of my cousins lives in Brisbane. She loves it there.”

“Oh, right. I’m from Adelaide.”

“Is that near Brisbane?” Carol handed her a towel. “Here, if you want to use this...” She sniffed and wiped her red nostrils, reaching for the gold mesh purse on the splashboard.

*Just like the one mum used to have,* Sarah thought. “A bit to the south.”

Carol prised the tarnished jaws of her purse open. “I must admit, I wouldn’t have relished sitting down to table with the Major like this. I think I would have been waiting to receive a very stern telling-off.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have even noticed.” Sarah wet the towel under the tap.

“Oh, he’s an army man.” Carol fished a grey hanky out of her purse. “Like my dad was. And I couldn’t sit down to dinner with him ‘til I’d passed a nail inspection.”

“Crumbs.” Sarah sprinkled salt on the stain and began to rub.

Carol wiped her nose with the hanky. “Yes, to this day I can’t eat without scrubbing my hands first. Followed by Bradley’s.”

“Hey, I reckon it’s going to work.” Sarah wiped a fuchsia tear from the edge of the dribbling red eye.

“Well, look at that.” Carol leaned over Sarah’s hand, studying the diffused mark. Sarah, glancing down at her exposed décolletage, the freckles and moles and molehills smattered across her amber skin, thought how strangely familiar the unrepeatable pattern looked.

“I feel I should offer you a sweetie or something.” Carol glanced at her purse. “I might have some stashed away.”

“Please don’t. I ate my body weight in junk on the flight.”

“I suspect they would have been antique sweeties anyway. Things tend to get lost in my purse.” Carol wet her hankie under the tap. “Only to resurface years later with children of their own.”

Sarah looked at the purse lying agape beside the sink, the tip of a room key poking through the open clasp like a stuck-out tooth. She suddenly remembered being a kid and going through her own mother’s evening purse, reverently handling every mysterious item, each pewter tube and dusty compact and scrap of woolly lint. She remembered the weight of the cold gold links in her hands, the way the slinky mesh had pooled in her palms. And the rich scent of the lining, the bits of inexplicable grit that had bounced from its dark corners when she’d pulled it inside out, searching for any last clue she could find about her



mum's other life, any hint of why it was she had to pack a purse and go out and leave her daughter behind.

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Bradley was waiting for them in the corridor, his arms tightly folded across his jacket, one foot propped against the wall. "Where have you been?" He levered himself off the wall.

"Bradley!" Carol snapped. "You shouldn't be camped outside the ladies' loos. People will think you're a weirdo."

"I'm a middle-aged man on holiday with his mother." Bradley stuck his fists into his tight trouser pockets. "I'm a certified weirdo."

"You see what I have to put up with?" Carol asked Sarah. "First he spills wine on me, then he insults me."

"I'm insulting myself. For being a sadsack who travels with his mum. In terms of social disgrace it's up there with getting caught humping a Care Bear in a toyshop."

"Well, it's not my fault you don't have a girlfriend to travel with," Carol said.

"Mother." Bradley gritted his teeth, his neck flushing brilliant red.

Sarah watched the colour blaze from his jaw to his earlobes. *Wow*, she thought, *I didn't know a head could do that.*

"If you spent more time going out on dates," Carol continued, "less time in front of the computer in your underwear..."

"Alright, alright. You can torture me over dinner." Bradley nudged her towards the foyer. "The Major's outside looking for our taxi. If we don't go find him soon he'll probably forget where he is and wander out into traffic."

“Don’t be disrespectful.” Carol looked at Sarah. “I’m wondering if we should ask this nice young lady to join us. Our treat.”

Sarah shook her head. “Oh, thank-you, but I’ve got a boyfriend waiting for me up in my hotel room.”

“Well, aren’t you the lucky one,” Bradley muttered.

Carol squinted at Sarah’s neckline and then quickly raised her hand as if trying to catch a bug. “You’re coming undone, love.”

“Oh...” Sarah looked down as Carol caught hold of a loose red thread, wrapping it around her finger. “God, I’m a complete sloven.” She blinked involuntarily as the thread snapped under her chin.

“I’m not as well presented as I’d like myself.” Carol looked down at her shirt, scratching the ghostly remainder of the mark with a yellow nail. “Thanks to some.”

“Next time I’ll aim for your head.” Bradley stomped out into the foyer.

“I hope you have a nice meal.” Sarah walked with Carol back into the reception area. The crowd by the desk had vanished; the space was quiet except for the uninhibited snores of an unattended male slouched by the pond in the corner of the room. Black water rippled in the basalt tub as though propelled by his phlegmatic exhalations; bars of reflected light danced across his heaving girth, the thighs bulging like pressed hams out of his khaki shorts.

“And I hope you manage to stay awake, ah...oh, I didn’t even get your name! Isn’t that terrible?” Carol gripped her arm, her fingers a warm soft band on Sarah’s skin.

“Not at all. It’s Sarah.”

“Hope to see you again, Sarah.”

“Yeah, likewise.” She watched Carol walk across the foyer, noticing she had a pronounced limp that made her jerk uncomfortably to the side. Bradley stood waiting for

her at the foyer entrance; when Sarah glanced at him she saw he was staring back at her. She gave him a half-smile and he looked down at his approaching mother, spikes of gelled black fringe falling into his eyes.

“Alright?” he murmured.

He held out a hand that Carol shooed away. “You might have been a Sarah if you’d been a girl,” Sarah heard her say quietly as they moved on together. “Why weren’t you born a girl?”

“To spite you, of course.” He scowled, revealing several grey teeth, a thick nub of fleshy tongue.

Jarring noise poured through the opening glass doors of the entranceway; the foyer filled with the throttle and screech of the cars rolling along the portico. The couple glowed nuclear orange as they walked out into the floodlit driveway, their frames bathed in the fluorescence shimmering like heat on the cobbled strip, bronzing the manicured lollipops of trees lining the kerb. As they turned to walk along the pavement Bradley strapped his arm across his mother’s rigid back, grappling her to his side as though she was an awkward package he was trying to carry.

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Sarah stuck her key card in the slot outside her room and jerked it back and forth. The white holder clicked undecidedly; the light above it blinked repeatedly red before, finally, green. “Honey, I’m home.”

Her boyfriend was lying on the giant white bed that occupied most of the space in the room. His bare torso was propped up on snowy pillows and his legs spreadeagled on the ivory duvet, reminding Sarah of a polar bear resting on a raft of ice. As she walked in he looked up from the open laptop balanced on his groin.

“Hey.” Paul smiled distractedly, the frown staying in his eyes. “Did you have any luck?”

“Luck?” The door shut with an unexpectedly heavy bang behind her.

“With finding out about that shopping centre the cab driver mentioned. The one he reckoned was all electronic stores.”

“Oh, Paul, sorry. I forgot.” She took the half-step to the edge of the bed. “It was chaos at the reception desk. And I got distracted by something. There was a bit of an incident.”

“An incident?” He stifled a yawn into a twitching jaw, a wrinkled nose.

“Yes, this guy had tipped wine...”

Paul’s eyes slid back to the screen, the whites sinking in reflected blue light.

“...all over himself, and he was threatening to set himself alight unless his demands were met.”

“Huh?” Paul’s Notebook fell onto the mattress as he sat up. “You’re kidding me.”

“Yes, I am.” Sarah nodded. “What happened was, well, nothing happened really. A lady spilled some wine on her blouse...”

“Shocker.” He levered himself up into praying position, the band of his black track pants sliding down around his bony hips. “And in the ensuing chaos you forgot to ask about my shopping centre.”

“Sorry. My bad.”

He shuffled towards her. His knees cut ripples into the smooth duvet like barges ploughing through white water. “The taxi driver was probably just talking crap. If there really was such a thing in Singapore as a 24-hour mall devoted to electronics, I would have heard about it.” He wobbled on the edge of the mattress, catching hold of her hands to steady himself. “I would have heard it calling in my dreams.”

“It does sound too good to be true.” Sarah swung the circle of arms out and in again. “An *entire shopping centre* full of electronic stores.”

“All duty-free.” His eyes filled with a look of childlike longing, silver seams glinting in his grey irises.

“Oh Paul.” She traced the shaving rash on his cheek, joining the irritated dots with her thumb. “I’ll go back down and ask about your mall.”

“It’s alright.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t have time to go there anyway. I’ve got that much reading to do for the bloody conference.” He looked over his bony shoulder at the laptop lying pitched like a tent on the quilt.

“And here I was thinking computer guys don’t read.”

“Watch it, mouth girl.” He tilted his head up, kissing the corner of her mouth and blowing a stream of fusty air between her lips.

She tipped her head back. “While we’re talking about mouth people...”

He frowned and breathed into his palm. “Not that bad, is it?”

Sarah looked at the vase of fabric orchids on top of the television. “If those things were real they’d be wilting.”

“Alright, alright.” Paul bounced off the bed and crouched down by his case. The fissure of his butt-crack deepened over the rim of his pants; wisps of copper hair poked out like exposed wires.

“My, the views these rooms come with.” Sarah fell sideways onto the bed, manoeuvring herself into the band of transferred body heat.

Paul stuck his hand down the side of the neatly packed case, feeling alongside a row of ties coiled like firecrackers and pulling out a white cylindrical toothbrush. “Now, batteries...”

He searched through the pockets in the roof of his case. The black holders were stuffed with silver gadgets, steel card holders and headphones and MP3 players, reminding Sarah of the implements in a doctor's bag.

"Forty bucks for a toothbrush and it needs batteries," she said.

"Oy!" He threw a packet of batteries at her that she caught and threw back. "You might want to start thinking about the fact we're locked in a red room together."

"I like the room colour." She looked at the burgundy walls that were dark above a belt of pale furniture: a bare teak desk, a white wardrobe, a Formica ledge sheltering a whirring mini-bar. "It feels womblike."

"Yeah, cramped." Paul vanished into the darkened bathroom. "You know Rollo and Marg booked themselves into an executive suite? We've got a shoebox and they're living the highlife up on the top floor?"

"Would you want to be on the same floor as your bosses?"

"No. But I wouldn't mind being in a room where I could take more than two steps in any direction." He groped the doorway and the bathroom blazed halogen. Tentacles of white light wrapped themselves around the lintel, turning chocolate as they spread across the bedroom wall.

"At least it's clean." She watched the orchids nod in the air-conditioned breeze. "I don't know when I've been in a bedroom this hygienic."

"It reminds me of my nan's room at the nursing home. All that's missing is the wee smell."

"But when was the last time you got to be in a room this uncluttered? That was so free of useless crap?"

"If I said before we got together, would you hurt me?"

"Not at first. But eventually, and when you were least expecting it, yes I would."

“Then I don’t know when.”

“Me neither.” She looked at the open wardrobe. The pole spanning the box was bare except for the two gauze bags holding Paul’s suits, strung like dark carcasses waiting to be butchered. Beneath the bags a single pair of tan leather shoes stood pigeon-toed on the immaculate floor. “I mean for once we’re going to have a wardrobe that just contains clothes. That just contains *our* clothes...” She thought of the cluttered recess of their wardrobe back home; the stack of yellowing sneakers heaped like wooden briquettes against the monitor of Paul’s obsolete computer, the broken electric blanket bulging through the walls of its box. The recent addition of garbage bags stuffed with clothes, the black sacks shiny amongst the dusty discards, tied with yellow bands knotted tight as though to prevent leakage. And the rent like a claw mark in one of the bags, the piebald cuff of a faux fur jacket poking through the tear.

“So you’re going to use the wardrobe?” Paul slotted batteries into the base of his toothbrush. “Cause I was thinking you’d already unpacked.” He glanced pointedly at Sarah’s backpack slumped drunkenly in the corner of the room, its mouth open and vomiting clothes.

“Yes, I’m going to use the wardrobe. I’m going to take erotic pleasure in using the wardrobe. And the drawers. Also empty, I might add.” She pulled open the top drawer on her side of the bed and an assortment of small brightly-coloured packets slid towards her. “Well, empty except for...” She read the embossed titles on the packets, each labelled in several different languages. “Band-aids, tights and a three-pack of condoms.”

“God, only *three*.” Paul shook his head as he lined his toothbrush with paste.

She crossed her legs and bounced on the bed. The interlocked springs of the mattress crunched softly under her backside. “And when have we been in a bed this nice?”

“I would guess at least twelve hundred people have had sex in that nice bed.” Paul’s toothbrush began to whine.

“Way to kill the mood, Paul.” She traced the fan of halogen spread across the bedspread with her foot. The bright light made the cotton weave look grainy.

*Like a marble slab in a tomb*, Sarah thought. “It’s still nicer than our bed back home. And compared to the bed in the spare room....”

She saw the chaos of items heaped upon the old sweat-stained duvet: the cluster of sympathy cards waiting to be responded to, the banana box of yellowing books grabbed en masse from her mother’s bookshelf.

A lump dropped like a pinball through her intestines and she leaned forward, hugging her knees to her chest. Cold air poured down her neck and she looked up at the vent on the ceiling. It exhaled icily on her face, its louvers blown full with chilled wind. “Just a shame about the air-conditioning.”

“You see, that’s what I *like* about this room.” Paul tipped his head back, scraping at his palate with his screeching brush. His eyes, staring down the bridge of his nose at his reflection, were suddenly maniacal.

“But it’s unnatural, this cold,” Sarah shouted over the maddening drill. “We’re in the tropics and it feels like Iceland.”

Paul snapped off the toothbrush. “Trust me, after a few hours outside you’ll be in love with the cold.”

“I guess.” She pivoted around towards the window. Bars of lager-coloured light shimmered through dark venetian blinds.

“It’s what saves Singapore, its magnificent air-conditioning. Without it this place would be a hellhole.”

She stood up and drew the blinds, exposing the view. In the haze of the setting sun the city looked like it was on fire; glazed skyscrapers glinted through smog, a curve of black river gleamed



like a trench of hot tar. White tower blocks rose from a road choked with fog; miniature pieces of washing hung on toothpick poles from open windows, flapping as if being waved by trapped inhabitants. “It does look pretty hot out there.”

“And that’s all it ever is, honey-buns. Hot.”

She leaned closer and the heat of the pane warmed her chilled nose. “Still, it will be good to get out there tomorrow. Have an explore.”

“And all the malls are air-conditioned too.”

“I don’t want to just go shopping.” Her eyes ascended the steppes of skyscraper. “I must admit, I didn’t think it would be quite this built-up.”

“What, Singapore?”

“Mmm.”

“That’s like its big selling point.” Paul walked back into the bedroom. His face was a tremulous half-moon on the smouldering skyline. “Why all the conference organisers go for it. It’s a place where delegates can get everything they can back home, only newer and better.”

“Newer isn’t the same as better.” She studied two cranes bent towards each other like giant courting birds; red lights shone like fiery plumage on their necks.

“Ah, blasphemy!” Paul flopped back on to the bed. “Don’t let any of the other computer geeks hear you talking like that or they’ll...”

“What?” Crane-shaped lines flashed on Sarah’s eyes as she turned around. “What will they do?”

“They’ll send you to a dark room somewhere.” In the dim his grin was the smile of a vanishing Cheshire cat. “For punishment.”

“They could just keep me in the lit room they’re in and talk to me about computers. That’d be as good a punishment as any.”

“Oh, you don’t mean that.” He reached for the waistband of her jeans, pulling her backwards to the edge of the mattress. “You love it when I start talking operating systems.”

She flopped down on the bed. “Oh, yeah, it drives me wild.”

He leaned over her. “Speaking in other...programming languages...”

“Makes me want to scream.”

“Just don’t scream too loud.” His breath was hot on her neck. “They’d probably hear you three floors up.”

“Might be nice for them.” She giggled as his lips tickled her larynx. “Do you really think twelve hundred people have had sex on this bed?”

“Oh, at least.”

“Wow, if this mattress could talk.”

His lips slid across her breastbone, making her stomach tingle. “It would say, ‘For the love of God, take me out and burn me.’”

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She closed the door behind her as quietly as she could, mindful of Paul’s fitful snoring. His throaty inhalations sounded like he was struggling to breathe.

The passageway outside her room was strangely still, the kind of enforced hush of a hospital ward after nursing staff had declared lights out. As Sarah walked towards the lift

vaporisers *tsked* reproachfully above her head. Humming yellow light shone on the dark lintels of the doors as though the cloistered guests were being incubated.

The lift arrived noiselessly almost as soon as she pushed the call button; a pair of chrome doors split open on a black stone box that looked too heavy to be raised. The air inside the lift was warm and damp with exhaled breath. Sarah studied the grid on the wall, reading the brass plates by the plastic numbers, the listings for gyms and saunas and bridal suites all printed in four different languages. The top floor was labelled *Rooftop Garden* and had a smoking symbol attached to the edge of the multilingual plate. She pushed the button and the lift doors rolled slowly across, the two iron halves locking with an unnerving clank. After a moment the floor started vibrating and Sarah's ears swelled with the pressure of upward motion.

She had the mild attack of claustrophobia she often had alone in a lift, the unpleasant sense of being separate from the world, entirely reliant on invisible cables. She looked at the chrome panel by the lift door, identifying the red stop button, the buzzer to press in an emergency, the grill through which she could yell at an operator. She suddenly had the sensation she wasn't alone, the feeling someone was standing behind her reading the list of safety instructions over her shoulder. She glanced around at the dark space. It was empty. Her chalky outline stared out of the polished black wall.

The lift reached the top floor with the *clack* of something snapping and the doors rolled open.

She stepped out into a small alcove fronted by a pair of glass doors. Trapezoids of steam hung like guillotine blades on the tinted panes. She pushed open the door to the Rooftop Garden and stepped out into a wet wall of motionless heat, gasping involuntarily at the loss of her chilled air supply.

A paved courtyard stretched out in front of her, an expanse of pebbled concrete trimmed with a border of wilting pot plants. A giant air vent droned in the corner, its white tower ghostly in the mud-brown sky. On the far side of the courtyard, beyond the pebble-dashed balustrade, the

neon outline of the city swam in liquid air, its grey monoliths described by blue signs and fuzzy borders of orange light. A man was sitting on a stone bench, staring out at the nightscape with his hands rested on his knees.

He looked up as she approached.

“Hello again, Major,” Sarah said.

He nodded uncertainly at her. “Good evening.” After a moment he pulled back the sleeve on his thick blazer, looking at his watch. “Or should I say good morning.”

“Oh, heck. I didn’t realise it was that late.”

“Only in this part of the world. In Greenwich I believe there’s still quite a bit of yesterday left.”

“Good to know.” She glanced down over the balustrade, watching the black tab of a car glide silently down an orange tube of street. Its headlights shone like white threads shot through amber cloth.

“I expect that’s why I can’t sleep. It’s only tea-time back home.”

“Are you having trouble sleeping too?”

“I’m struggling to adjust to being back in Singapore, I think.”

“You’ve been here before?”

She looked at him when he didn’t reply. He was staring down at a small brown bird hopping along the balustrade. It paused to peck at the grit beneath a small scrappy shrub, then to thresh a cigarette butt with its beak.

“He’s up early.” The Major reached out a finger and the bird hopped away again. “Must be confused about what time it is as well.”

“I presume you saw the results, but the salt worked a treat. On Carol’s blouse,” Sarah said.

“Did it?” He looked evenly at her; after a moment a light of comprehension flashed in his eyes. “Oh, yes, of course, you’re the young lady who gave her the...She was most pleased. Good show. Well done.” He patted the seat beside him lightly. His fingers seemed painfully thin and gnarled beneath the thick round of his cuff. “Do take a seat.”

“Thanks.” She perched awkwardly on the edge of the stone bench, maintaining a careful distance from his straddled legs. “Well done you, more like. I don’t think many men would know how to get wine out of a shirt.” She realised she was almost shouting above the vent. “My boyfriend certainly wouldn’t.”

His pupils seemed to float across his watery eyes.

“Carol mentioned you had a thing for cleanliness,” Sarah continued awkwardly. “Being in the army and all.”

“We had inspections every morning in the barracks.” His voice suddenly sped up as if he was reciting by rote. “And if everything about your person and personal effects weren’t spotless you were in for it. So with ink stains you used sour milk, and with dirt...” He rubbed a bit of trouser leg between shaking finger and thumb. “You blotted in a bit of vinegar.”

“And salt on red wine.”

“Salt you used on blood.”

“Oh.” Sarah blinked. “Oh, blood.”

“Most effective on blood, bit of salt.”

“I suppose you’d have needed to...” Sarah stared down at the man’s hands. The skin on them looked greasy against the dark weave of his trousers, like Clingfilm wrapped loose on lumps of grey flesh. She tried to imagine his hands scrubbing out bloodstains. “You have a good memory.”

“Some things you don’t forget.” He stared over the balcony, his eyes obscured behind lenses bathed in light pollution. “Especially when you have them drilled into you.” After a moment he pulled a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and dabbed at the glistening beads of sweat on his temples.

*He must be baking*, Sarah thought, looking at the blue tubes bulging in his forehead. “Um, do you think we should maybe go in? It’s pretty hot out here.”

“You go, dear, you go.” He waved the hanky at her. “This kind of heat never worried me.”

She stood up slowly. “Makes me feel like I’m locked in a sauna.”

The Major stared at the sooty horizon. “No, I always loved it, this kind of heat...So different to how it was at home. Made me feel alive...” His voice disappeared beneath the drone of vents and cicadas but his mouth kept opening and closing, as though still speaking to someone Sarah couldn’t see.

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Sarah slid her key slowly in and out of the holder outside her room. When the light remained red she repeated the action more quickly. The light stayed red. “Oh!” She thumped the panel with her closed fist. “Let me in, you stupid hunk of...”

The door flew open.

“*Sarah.*” Paul slung a protective arm slung across his eyes. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, sorry, babe!”

Paul stumbled back towards the bed.

“I was having trouble sleeping.” She closed the door quietly behind her. “I kept waking up. So I thought...”

“That you’d wake me up as well.” Paul threw the quilt over his head.

“I was hoping a walk might tire me out. I’m so sorry.”

Paul’s reply was muffled beneath the drift of snowy duvet.

“I just wanted to make myself conk out. Get past the REM stage.” She shuffled around to her side of the bed, clambering onto the icy fitted sheet she had left exposed to the elements. “I kept having bad dreams.” She wiggled towards the heat radiating from Paul’s back. The contours of the mattress buckled stiffly under her, clunking dully like an engine freezing over. “I mean, not bad, just...anxious.”

Paul grunted.

She curled in a loose spoon behind Paul. “I kept dreaming I was back at Changi Airport and had to catch a flight. And I was late and I couldn’t find the departure gate I had to get to.” She saw the massive terminal she’d been running along in her dream, the seemingly never-ending concourse packed with people to dodge: baggage handlers in fluoro vests careering along on beeping carts; hunchbacked cleaners vacuuming pot plants with mammoth shoulder packs; men in turbans pushing trolleys laden with giant rods of Toblerone. “What’s weird is I think I was trying to get home to see mum.” Saying it made her throat tighten and she swallowed. “In my dream she was still alive or something. I dunno. I think it was like I had to get on that flight if I was going to see her.”

Paul rolled onto his back. “You won’t have the same dream, Sarah, if you go back to sleep.”

“You can guarantee that?”

“Yeah, it’s like lightning.” Paul’s eye socket squelched as he rubbed it. “Same scientific principle.”

“But I’ve had that dream about three times tonight, Paul. And I’ve dreamt stuff like that before.”

“You’ll start having better dreams soon, Sarah. You will.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Because I control the chip implanted in your head.” He shuffled towards her, insinuating his hip under hers, nudging her sideways.

After a moment she rolled over and he rolled with her. She slid her hand under her cheek to stop her face being pushed into the pillow. “Paul, have you dreamed about mum since she died?”

“Sarah...”

She scrunched a handful of pillowcase. “Have you?”

“I dreamed about her a few days ago.”

“Really?” She pushed against his bulk. “You didn’t mention that.”

“I guess I thought it would upset you.”

“It wouldn’t have.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure, and I didn’t want to risk it.”

“No, that’s fair enough.” She released the cotton drill and gripped it again. “What was she doing?”

“Huh?”

“In your dream. What was mum doing?”

“Oh Sarah, I don’t know. I’m not a big rememberer of dreams, OK?”

“Oh.”

“Look, she was just being like your mum used to be. Talking a lot.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. I think...Shane Warne, maybe?”

“Shane *Warne*?” She twisted around to stare at him.

“I think she was talking about the whole diet pill thing.”



“What was she saying about it?”

He slapped a hand across his screwed up features. “Look, it was a dumb dream, Sarah.”

“Paul...”

“I think she was saying something like, he shouldn’t have been penalised for taking the pills, he just wanted to look nice for his mum.”

“Oh.” She stared up at the ceiling. “Oh, wow. I can’t believe mum came to you in a dream to stick up for Shane Warne.”

“You see, even in heaven they’re outraged about his suspension.” He paused.

“Sorry.”

“No, that’s alright.” She hooked her ankle over his feet. “I’m glad you got to dream about mum. I’m glad you got to see her.”

“You’ll dream about her soon, Sare.”

She rolled back onto her side. “Did she sound happy? I mean...was she happy in your dream?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure.” He rubbed her back slowly. “She was fine. Really happy and chatty.”

“Was she able to talk again...properly?”

“She sounded good, Sarah. Really good. And it was just a dream, OK?” His hand moved slowly back and forth across her back as though trying to find an off switch. “See, my theory is, what happens is I hear you talking in your sleep and it turns into dreams about your mum.”

“But I don’t sound that much like mum, do I?”

“Are you kidding? You sound heaps like her.”

“People tell me that but I can’t hear it.”

“She had the same laugh as you.”

“You reckon?”

“You both have this sound like seals when they’re clapping their flippers, kind of *uh, uh, uh, uh...*” The last *uh* glided out on the crest of a yawn.

“God, I’d forgotten that.” She squeezed his bare shoulder and he whimpered sleepily. “Sorry, cold hands.” She stuck her hand back under the duvet. “Yeah, she had a mad laugh on her, didn’t she? When she got going it was like she was hyperventilating or something. There was no stopping her.” She licked her dry lips. “Paul. Paul?”

“Sarah, please try to sleep, honey.”

“Just let me tell you about this one fit she had once at church. It’s funny.”

“Uh.”

“This guy from my school, James Finch, had got up to do a reading. He was always doing the readings, I think his parents fancied him for the ministry or something.” A thought struck her. “Mrs Finch wrote the obituary for mum in the parish newsletter. You remember? She called it *The Martha We Needed* or something. She wrote all this stuff about mum being the person who could be relied on to buzz around at church morning teas making sure everyone had a seat. That she never sat down herself. And that she could remember mum being really sick and still limping around with plates of biscuits and chair cushions.” She stared at Paul’s sheet-white face. “I think Mrs Finch was trying to be kind.”

Paul sighed.

“Alright, so James Finch was reading this passage about Jesus and the Gentiles. Only he kept calling them the *genitals*. I don’t think he was being funny, I just think he didn’t know the difference between the two. And I wasn’t sure I was even hearing him right ‘cause when I looked around everyone in the church seemed to be just sitting there. It was only when I glanced at mum’s face I knew I wasn’t imagining things. And this

passage seemed to be all about the Gentiles...” She chuckled, remembering, dimly, James’ mumbling monologue into the lectern microphone, the reddening ears of the priest seated beside him. The bushy crown of her mum’s dark hair pressed between her knees, the nubs of her fingers just visible through her thick fringe. “And by about the fourth mention of genitals mum was pretty much on the ground. And then the passage got to the bit where the Lord castigated the Gentiles, only of course James said *castrated* the *genitals*. And mum made this snorting noise and ran out the side door. I went after her and found her out in the car park and she was just *gone*. She couldn’t even speak for about five minutes.”

In his sleep, Paul murmured something.

“Yes, I know.” Sarah blew a strand of hair off his forehead, making him wrinkle his nose. “It’s time to sleep.” She nestled closer to him, picturing fragmented images of her mother laughing, stills of her wiping tears off her red cheeks, clutching her stomach in agonised hilarity. She closed her eyes, willing the frames to join together to form a moving image, for speech to accompany the sound of laughter echoing in her head.

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Sarah cupped her coffee in her hands. Across the table Paul yawned throatily over a wad of paper. His reflection stretched over her chrome saucer; the apex of his forehead was squashed above huge tubular nostrils and lips. “You look tired,” she said.

“Brrrr.” His jowls flapped around white incisors as he shook his head. “Can’t think why.” He shoved the last morsel of jam-laden croissant into his mouth. Strawberry droplets dribbled onto the page.

“I’m sorry, Paul.” Sarah looked away across the cafe as he yawned again mid-chew. The large room was packed with diners. Parents stared silently at each other over the heads of their

shouting children. On the back wall a row of solo business people sat hunched behind a bulwark of titanium laptops. Near Sarah an elderly couple was dissecting smoked fish fillets with tiny silver knives, working with the silent precision of surgeons, the blades flashing as they sliced through the charred flesh. “I hope you manage to stay awake at the conference.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine. Hopefully they’ll start the lap dances early.”

She ran her spoon around her cereal bowl, scraping up soaked dregs of cornflake. “And you reckon you’ll be stuck there all day?”

“Unless we get lucky and someone phones in a bomb-threat.” He picked up the coffee plunger and tipped silt into his cup.

She scraped the cornflake paste off her spoon with her teeth. “It’s just a pity you can’t get out at all. We could meet up for lunch.”

He pulled a face on a mouthful of rancid coffee. “I don’t think I could swing it, babe. Rollo and Marg will be there, and they’ll probably be...”

“Riding your sweet arse.”

“Well, at least watching it. Keenly.”

“And who could blame them.” She squeezed his ankle with her feet. “I’m just sorry for you being stuck inside all day. It’s a shame you won’t get a chance to see much of Singapore.”

“You’ll have to do the seeing for both of us.” He dumped the rest of the milk in his coffee. Cream light shone on his freshly-shaved chin. “I was going to say, depending on what you were planning on doing, I could float you some cash.”

“I’ll be alright, Paul, I’m not quite on the breadline yet.”

“No, but you’re still only part-time at the library. And Singapore’s a pricy place. Marg reckons she maxed out her Gold Amex last time she was here.”

“Fortunately we both know there’s no company on earth that would give me a credit card.”

“What troubles me is you say that like it’s a good thing.”

“I must admit I do take a perverse sense of pride in the fact.” She smiled at his pained expression. “It’s cool, Paul, I don’t intend to go on a mad shopping binge or anything. I think the quickest way I could lose the will to live is try on clothes cut for Asian women’s hips.”

“God, I’m steering well clear of that comment.”

“What I really feel like doing today is taking a walk. Maybe head over to Raffles.”

“The hotel?”

“Yeah, I read it’s in the middle of the old colonial district of Singapore. Apparently it’s an interesting area to walk around.”

“I think Raffles is a fair pull from here.” Paul slid his print-out into the sleeve in the lid, the sheets lily white under the black mesh. “You’ll be knackered before you get there.” He opened his dormant laptop, the screen whirring as he levered it upright. “I’ll see how far it is from the hotel.”

“I can work it out. I’ve got a tourist map...” She pulled the map out of her bag.

“God, you don’t want to fuck around with those things.”

“What do you mean?” She unfolded the map, releasing a compressed landscape of green and gold. “What’s wrong with my map?”

“Tourist maps suck.” The keys on Paul’s laptop twittered like Mahjong tiles. “They’re always out-of-date and you can’t get them closed up again.”

“Sure you can.” The map crackled as she flapped it straight. “One of the things I used to love doing when I was travelling was grab a map and go for a walk. Especially if I was new to a city.”

“And wanted to advertise the fact to all potential muggers and rapists.”

She raised the map in front of her eyes, blocking out Paul, his laptop, the busy room behind him. The depiction of Singapore reminded her of an arm bent slightly at the elbow, its salmon-pink terrain venous with yellow roads, thick red expressways, thin blue rivers. A few spots of green were scattered like gangrene across the otherwise smooth skin. She read the legend at the bottom of the page. “Raffles is at G6. Right...” She followed the coordinates to the central portion of the map, a blue rectangle encasing a cluster of grey buildings; the shapes were magnified as though locked in the sights of a fighter plane. “Here!”

Paul’s typing sped up combatively. “Alright, and where’s our hotel?”

“Uhh...” She waved her hand around the bottom corner of the rectangle. “I’m guessing...”

“You sure you’ve got the map the right way up?”

“You’re just being a pain now.”

“Do you even know what hemisphere we’re in, Sarah?” Paul’s eyebrow arched like a ginger caterpillar over the edge of his laptop.

She stared at him.

“The Northern one.”

“I knew that.”

The caterpillars wrinkled in amusement as he looked back down at his screen.

“Humph.” She spread the map across her knees. “I suppose in the future we’ll all have GPS devices built into our brain stems, won’t we?”

“And I thought librarians couldn’t be forward-thinking.” Paul’s laptop beeped. “OK, Google Maps reckons it’s about a five k walk from here to Raffles. Which translates to about fifty in the heat.”

“Pauly, don’t exaggerate.”

“I’m serious, Sarah. You don’t want to make yourself sick.” He looked pointedly at her untouched bacon sandwich. “I noticed you haven’t had much breakfast as it is.”

“I always get carried away at hotel buffets. Take on more food than I can eat.” She stared guiltily at the long buffet bench filled with steaming Bain Maries. A row of green lamps shone over mounds of luminous rice, leaning towers of yellow mung bean pancakes, a ring of eggs arranged beneath a circle of hot light.

“Is your stomach playing up again?”

She shrugged, patting her puffed belly.

“Look, take a cab.” He pulled a ticket book out of his pocket and tore off a few slips of paper. “I was going to give you some of these anyway.”

She looked at the tickets. “‘*International Cabcharge Vouchers.*’ Wow, Paul, you are the man.”

“Not yet, I’m not. But I’m working on it.” Paul’s Blackberry rattled inside his case like something buried alive. “Oh, fuck it, I have to go.” He slung his laptop into its bag and stood up, grabbing his jacket off the back of his chair. “Did you want me to print out that map for you?”

“I’m guessing most cab drivers will know where Raffles is.”

“And taxis in Singapore have GPS as standard, you’ll be pleased to know.”

“A place where even the taxi drivers can’t get lost.” She shook her head. “It really is a brave new world.”

He looked blankly at her for a moment before his face eased into a lopsided grin. “I sometimes suspect you’re not as much of a technophobe as you pretend to be.”

“You’ll never prove it.”

He picked up his case and rested it on the table. “You know what? I reckon I could get away for lunch today.”

“What about Rollo and Marg?” she asked, surprised.

“Oh, it will good for them to have to do without me for an hour. It’ll make them want me more.” Paul’s phone rattled again. “I know, I know.” He shook his briefcase until the rattling stopped. “Why don’t we go somewhere nice for lunch? My shout.”

“God, Paul. Taxi vouchers, lunch...are you trying to butter me up for something?”

“No.” Something in his expression changed. “I just want you to have a nice day, that’s all.” He shrugged his jacket on over hunched shoulders.

“Sorry, Paul, I know. Just a dumb joke.” She bit her lip, suspecting she’d hurt his feelings. “I guess my humour’s pretty off lately.”

He paused. “What do you mean, lately?”

“Sauce!” She slapped his arm, relieved to see the clouds lifting on his face. “And lunch would be great.”

“Cool.” His grey eyes shone, the sun rising on glacial lakes. “I’ll come find you in the room about one?”

She nodded.

He kissed her cheek; his balmed skin was moist and clammy against hers. “Wish me luck.”

“Best of British, darl.” Sarah watched him stride across the room. “Go well, oh conquering hero,” she murmured, looking back down at her sandwich. The bread was now translucent with absorbed fat and sagging over the rashers like a wet grey quilt.

*Finish your breakfast, Sarah, she told herself, hearing another voice echo the words, there are people starving in China.*



She rubbed her stomach slowly as she pushed her sandwich away.

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“Where are you from?” the taxi driver asked her on the way to Raffles.

“Australia.”

“Oh, Australia!” He glanced at her in the rear view mirror. “Which part?”

“South Australia. Adelaide.” She looked at the ultramodern buildings rolling past the cab window: a shopping centre laid out like a Byzantine palace, with a blue dome and sandstone pillars flanked by palm trees; an office block with grey balconies protruding from yellow brick walls; a steel building with a triangular buttress jutting out of its facade like the upturned keel of a sinking ocean liner.

“Ah, Adelaide.” The driver nodded. “I’ve been to Perth.”

“You’re doing better than me. I haven’t been to Perth.” They passed a glass-fronted gym. The silhouette of a man rowed frantically through sea-green glazing; on the level above him a woman pounded doggedly on a treadmill, her head hidden behind a screen of condensation. “It’s too far away.”

“You have a lot of space in Australia.”

“Yeah. Too much space.”

“You can give us some of it. We don’t have enough.” The taxi jerked to a sudden halt as the driver pulled up at a congested intersection. “There, that’s Raffles.” He waved through the corner of his windscreen.

Sarah leaned forward, peering over his shoulder through the spotless pane. Across the intersection a bone-white slab of building glared beneath a belt of grey sky. “OK. Nice.” *It looks like a prison*, she thought, staring at the small windows sunk deep in the hotel walls, the dark panes ribboned with crisscrossed bars, the high balustrade running along the top of the flat roof.

“The Swissotel, that’s nicer.” The taxi driver gestured at a cylindrical building opposite Raffles. “Tallest hotel in Asia.”

Sarah craned her neck, trying to see the top of the tower disappearing like a concrete beanstalk into the sky. “Wow.”

“And the drinks are cheaper than they are at Raffles. Raffles is too expensive.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’ll buy anything.” *Or touch anything*, Sarah thought, looking back at the high white portico of Raffles.

“Raffles, the good thing is you get the door opened by a Sikh doorman, you know?” He spoke the word quickly, making it sound like *sick*. “A proper Sikh doorman. Can you see?”

“Yes, I see him...” A man in a turban and white frock coat was pacing along the pavement, his waist wrapped in a thick gold cummerbund, the tassled band of what looked like a sword strap slung across his chest. She looked down at her scuffed sneakers and jeans. “Is there another way I can get in?”

“If you want.”

Sarah gripped the back of the passenger seat as the car accelerated with the changing lights, dragging off a throttling motorcycle before pulling up quickly again at the kerb.

“You can get in through there.” The driver pointed at an archway built into the white flank of the hotel. The beads clacked on his seat as he turned to look at her. “\$11.50.”

She paid the taxi driver and stepped out into the stifling heat. The taxi sped away as soon as she shut her door, narrowly missed a man slowly pedalling a tricycle along the side of the road;

the rusted vehicle was attached to a cart loaded with scrap metal. The man was thin with reeds of grey hair plastered across his balding scalp like the frame of a half-woven basket. He stood up suddenly on his pedals, treading up and down with surprising agility as if determined to catch up with the thrumming cars roaring past him. Sarah noticed one of his knees was bound with a fresh-looking white bandage. *I hope he doesn't have too much further to go*, she thought.

The noise of the traffic fell away as she walked through the archway, tailing off so suddenly she almost felt as if she had stepped through some kind of portal. The sensation increased as the passage opened out into a courtyard echoing with ambient noise. A white stone fountain plashed gently in the centre of the sun-drenched terrace; water dripped like diamantes from clam-shaped holders into a sparkling basin. Around the fountain guests reclined on white chairs under large green umbrellas. Palm trees sheltered the canvas canopies, their elephantine trunks ashen against the high white walls, the chequerboard of red shuttered windows. *It's not a prison, it's a fortress*, Sarah thought. *One designed to shut out the real world.*

She followed the colonnade running along the edge of the terrace; the cloistered space echoed with the clack of heels and the whoosh of the ceiling fans spinning in gilded circles above her head. Brightly-lit shops lined the passageway, goods arranged in their windows like art installations: a loaf of knotted bread reclining like a Picasso nude on a cloth; an anthill of rust-red powder heaped in the centre of a huge metal disc; a single silk scarf tied in a cravat around a white bar. A trestle table was set up on the pavement outside the scarf shop, with a couple of women rummaging through a heap of duller-looking items in the tray.

“The purple’s definitely the best,” Sarah heard the younger woman say.

The older woman looked down at the dun-coloured scarf in her hands. “I think this one would go with more.”

“But the purple’s much, much prettier, mum,” the younger woman coaxed, draping the fringed corner of a violet scarf over her mother’s shoulder.

The older woman frowned at the scarf, the creases between her eyes deepening. "People would think I'd gone on the game, Michelle."

"You want a scarf to be a bit flashy, mum. So you can dress up plain outfits."

"Like the ones I wear, I suppose."

The younger woman's lips met her sunburned cheeks as she grinned. "I just think..." She wrapped the scarf around her mother's neck, tying it in a loose bow. "Oh, that's so pretty." She looked at Sarah. "Excuse me, doesn't my mum look great in this scarf?"

Sarah stopped and looked at the scarf, then the wearer. Above the flounced bow the older woman's jaw trembled quizzically, her pale chin tinged lilac. "It's a beautiful scarf."

"Pity about the head on top of it." The older woman unwrapped her neck.

"Oh no, not at all," Sarah said quickly. "No, I think it looks lovely, it...it really suits your colouring."

"My colouring?"

"Purple really works with people who've got green eyes. And brown hair." Sarah glanced at the woman's hair, the strands of grey woven into her chestnut bob. "My mum had similar colouring to you and she loved purple." She had a sudden image of her mother's naked scalp, the stubbly black hairs sprouting from the cancerous lump on her skull.

"I really prefer my browns," the older woman said doubtfully.

"Do you ever," her daughter mumbled.

"And even at half price..." The woman looked at the white tag dangling from the scarf, pulling a face as she read the price. "It's still more than I'd spend on something I'd hardly wear."

"Mum!" The younger woman raised a firebrand eyebrow at her mother. "What's the point of coming half way around the world if you're going to be so flipping tight?"

The older woman stared at the scarf, fingering the beaded trim, the sequins reflected in her tarnished rings.

*Go on, get it, Sarah thought. I bet you never get anything for yourself.*

“No, I’m going to think about it. Over a cup of tea.” The woman dropping the scarf back onto the table, the delicate fabric unfurling across the tangled heap.

The younger woman rolled her eyes at Sarah.

Sarah smiled back at her with one side of her face, not wanting the older woman to notice. She watched the pair walking slowly away along the colonnade, the younger woman swinging side to side as she walked, her petite mother taking small tight steps alongside her. They reminded Sarah of a picture in one of her favourite childhood books, of Piglet and Pooh walking side by side across a snowy field. Especially when, as they approached a small group travelling in the opposite direction, the older woman reached out and took her daughter by the arm.

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Sarah’s gaze was irresistibly drawn upwards as she walked into the lobby. Sunlight poured through glass panels in the raftered ceiling, flooding it like an incandescent river bursting its banks. White columns stretched from ceiling to floor, their smooth stone bracketed by ornate cornices, the plaster foliage dense and tangled with light and shade. Rings of creamy lanterns dropped like lustrous-footed spiders on thin golden threads. Orbs of hazy light shone on the marble floor like moons in a cloudy sky.

Her sneakers rasped on the polished marble and the concierge stationed by the entrance looked up at her; his welcoming smile faded as he took in her outfit, faded further as she raised a hand in a timid half-wave. His eyes were back on his lectern before she had crossed the room.

A pair of glazed double doors led into a dimmer room, its windows aglow with hauls of sunlight trapped in yellowing curtains. Leather armchairs slouched around low tables. A large mahogany bookcase stood in one corner; a man in a navy suit was positioned in front of it. His stance was so motionless she almost thought he was a waxwork until he glanced around. For a moment he looked startled; the sharp pigments in his eyes slowly dissolved into a look of blurry recognition.

“Hello again, Major!”

He nodded in greeting. “The ministering Australian returns.”

She walked over to him. “You’re going to think I’m stalking you.”

“Rather you than a tiger, my dear.”

Sarah grinned.

“You smile, but they shot a tiger at Raffles once. They think it was possibly the last wild tiger in Singapore.” He swallowed hard, forcing lubrication into his cracked throat. “They cornered it in the billiards room.”

“Oh, the poor thing!”

“Well, perhaps it wouldn’t have minded too much. It probably would have had quite a lonely existence, as the last wild tiger in Singapore.” He stepped up and down on polished brogues as if commencing a stiff-legged march. “I suspect the story is as much myth as fact. Someone once shot a boar in the kitchen, perhaps, and over the years it became a tiger in the billiards room. Heroic exploits tend to expand with time.” He patted the molehill of his stomach. “Like waistlines.”

“Please. You’re as slender as they come.”

“I feel heavy as a stone after the breakfast I’ve just had in the Tiffin Room. Well, I say breakfast, but everyone else seemed to be referring to it as a *brunch*. I don’t know how that differs

from a breakfast.” His lips trembled, possibly with amusement. “But that is what I have been to, an *all-you-can-eat-buffet-brunch*.” He spoke with careful emphasis as though pronouncing the words of a recently-learned language.

“Lovely.”

“But it leaves you rather drowsy, doesn’t it, overeating at this time of the day?” He blinked chelonian lids. “I would have been happy with something much lighter, but Carol was determined I should have a proper feed. She was reluctant to excuse me from the table just now, but I was about to fall asleep into my kedgeriee.”

“Carol’s here with you?”

“Yes, her and her son, er....”

“Bradley.”

“Bradley. They might be missing me, actually.” He glanced jerkily over his shoulder as if expecting to be apprehended. “I have already been absent longer than I said I would be, but I did want to take a quick stroll. The rest of my day is jam-packed with appointments which I expect will involve a great deal of eating and sitting down.”

“You have a hectic schedule, Major?”

“This afternoon I shall take High Tea with the British Commissioner, tonight I shall dine with some of the men from my division, and then later I’ll be touring the battlefields of Singapore...”

“Wow. You are going to be busy,” she said uncertainly, wondering if he was humouring her or perhaps going senile.

“Well, this is the weekend when Singapore celebrates the end of the war, you see. The end of World War II, that is. And there’s rather a lot on.”

“Oh, right!” Comprehension dawned. “Oh, wow, is that why you’re here? You were in World War II?”

“I...yes. Yes, I was.” A frown wrinkled the baby smooth skin on his forehead. “Although it’s always seemed an odd way to put it. To say I was *in* World War II.”

“Sorry,” Sarah said awkwardly.

“My dear, I did not mean to make you uncomfortable. It’s just the term that has always struck me as peculiar. To say a person has been *in* a war, as though it was something a person could be within, like a bus. I was in the war and then I was *without* it...” His voice tailed off. “Forgive me. I quibble over points of grammar. A sign of what an old bore I have become.”

“Not at all, Major.”

“The war is over.” He smiled at her. “And now we must get through the long days of the peace.”

“Will today be very arduous for you?”

“This might be the only time I have to myself.”

“And here I am interrupting it.”

“It is a lovely interruption. And I wasn’t feeling particularly solitary anyway. I don’t think you can in a place like this. Too many spirits haunt these corridors.” He looked at the entrance to the room. “I keep expecting Rudyard Kipling to walk in at any minute.”

“You do?” She glanced over her shoulder at the empty foyer.

“Yes. He used to drink here often, you know, when he was out in the colonies.”

“Ah, right.” She nodded. “I think I read that in my guidebook.”

“He famously advised travellers to feed here, but stay somewhere else.”



“You are a fount of knowledge, Major.”

“Useless knowledge, for the most part.” He turned to the bookcase. “But I can’t help wondering if any of these books were once the property of Mr Kipling. They seem to be of his era.”

“That would make them pretty valuable.” She cupped her hands on the lead-blackened glass. She could just make out shelves packed with books, olive green and rust red volumes with puckered leather spines; age had compressed the wood-coloured pages into seemingly uncut reams. Some of the spines had illustrations filled with tarnished gilt: the profile of a laughing elephant; a man with a rifle kneeling behind a log; another, sitting cross-legged, charming a snake out of a basket. The books’ titles were printed in lustreless gold, the words disappearing into fissures where the binding had cracked: *AN UTCAS OF THE SLANDS* by *JOSEPH CONRAD*; *HE MOON AND IXPENCE* by *SOMERSET MAUGHAN*; *SOLDIER THREE* by *RUDYAR KIPL*. “They’re definitely...” It seemed wrong to say *old* in front of the Major. “Weathered. But it would be great to have a look at them. See if any of them are first editions.”

“I imagine a lot of people would like to have a look at them.” The Major prodded the tarnished keyhole securing the two doors, making it rattle. “Probably why they have been put under lock and key. For their own protection.”

“Books should never be locked up.” Her words shimmied on the pane.

“No?” His magnified eyes glimmered through his lenses. “You think they should be left to face the elements?”

“And thieving Australians?”

He chuckled.

“Yes I do.” She looked at a book lying loose on the top of a crammed row, the title printed in brighter gilt on a newer-looking spine: *THE LONG DAY WANES* A. *BURGESS*. Her fingers

itched to find a space for it in one of the rows. “If you lock books away, you don’t have a library anymore, you have a book graveyard.”

“Well, I’d say most of these books are on their last legs anyway.”

“But one of these books might just be the last copy of the text in existence, you know?” She pressed her forehead against the glass. Volumes swam in a sepia sea. “And if it’s just allowed to rot away it will be lost for good. I mean, even if people don’t really read a certain book anymore, or agree with what it has to say, they should still try to ensure a record of it is kept.”

“I think that’s the nature of things, dear. You get to my age, you realise a lot more will be erased than retained. Older books need to make way for newer ones.”

“But books are like historical records, aren’t they? They tell us a bit about how things used to be. How our parents and grandparents lived and what they thought about things...”

“Maybe that’s why we let them go, my dear. Because we don’t really want to know what our parents thought, or how they lived.” His eyes seemed to bob up to the ceiling. “I don’t think I ever really absorbed my father’s experiences of the Great War. If I had I suspect I would have hesitated to enrol in the Army myself.” He squinted at the plasterwork as if something was written in fine print on it. “Although I do think there are some things we can only understand by experiencing them ourselves. All the imparted knowledge in the world won’t make us understand the reality of some things.” His face momentarily became motionless as a death mask; then his eyes glittered like melting black ice. “This room has turned quite cool, though, hasn’t it?”

“Yes.” The back of her neck tingled, partly as a response to the mercurial shift in his expression. “Either that or someone just walked on my grave.”

“Perhaps it’s just the ghost of Rudyard returning for his morning Scotch.”

“Perhaps it is.” She heard a cracking noise like a match being unsuccessfully struck. Looking down she saw one of the doors of the bookcase had opened. “Oh, lord.” She caught her

breath, inhaling the musty scent of the cloistered texts. “Major, that’s too freaky for words, isn’t it?”

She glanced around when he didn’t reply. He was already in the foyer, moving with surprising agility across the lobby, his hands swinging by his sides as if paddling through the rarefied air. “Too freaky for words,” she said quietly.

The lopsided book sighed as she lifted it off its bed of frayed leather edges. Its covers felt cold and moist, like a reptile that had gone too long without sunlight.

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As she walked back into the lobby a bright light flashed in her eyes.

“Sorry!” She blinked through dazzled pupils at the darkened photographer. “I got in your shot.”

Rips of flashing light drifted away to reveal Bradley’s grainy face. “The beauty of digital photos is you can edit out the bits you don’t want.”

“Oh, it’s you again.” Sarah glanced around the empty foyer. “Given your mum the slip, have you?”

He tipped his head back, making the expression in his eyes hard to read.

“Tell her I said hi.” Sarah walked towards the main exit, a pair of wooden doors set with frosted glass panels.

“Do you like flowers?” Bradley asked her.

“Huh?” She turned around.

He was standing where she had been a moment ago, beside a vase of white flowers on a half-moon table. “Flowers. You into them?”

She shrugged.

“These orchids here.” He looked at the geyser of phosphorous blooms spouting up the wall. “I think they might be a new species.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Or at least a new hybrid. Which is what you get when you cross two types of orchid...”

“I know what a hybrid is.”

“So you are into flowers then?”

She walked back over to the vase. “Not as much as you are, it seems.”

“Oh, I’m discerning in my affections. But these are rather pretty little things.” He ringed an open bloom with his index finger. A pinwheel of large white petals flanked a pink stigma that looked like an emerging insect: a bulbous head with a pair of flesh-coloured petals raised like wings.

“Nice.” Sarah tried not to sound interested.

“I’d say they’re Vanda crossed with something. I’m not sure what.” Bradley clucked his tongue, sending a tiny fleck of spittle into the arrangement. “But I’ve never seem them before. They might have been produced especially for the hotel.”

“I suppose this place would have the dough to do that.”

“It doesn’t cost that much to crossbreed orchids. A lot of people do it for fun.”

“They must be pretty hard up for fun.”

“I’m hoping to do it myself soon.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve got my own gardening business.” His chin bristled like a stirring porcupine as he grimaced. Sarah noticed the stubble around his mouth was thicker than it had been the night before and laced with crumbs, white specks nestled like lice in the black whiskers. “Although yes, I am also hard up for fun.”

*He doesn’t look like a gardener,* Sarah thought, studying the slalom of his long white nose. “And here I was thinking you were just a guy who liked flowers.”

“Flowers, I like. The type of people who buy them from me, not so much.”

“You don’t get lots of eco-friendly hippies?”

“Those people actually tend to create their own gardens. I get people who do daytrips to the Chelsea Flower Show and realise they must get their garden redesigned immediately or face social ridicule. That and rich businessmen who want a protective screen behind which they can shag the *au pair*.”

“Ah.”

“Or who’ve come back from their holiday in the Maldives all loved up for some exotic bloom they saw growing beside the pool deck. And they want me to propagate it in their Cotswolds’ weekender and they don’t care how much it’s going to cost or what third-world plant-smuggling cartel I’ll have to engage the services of to get it to them. Basically my customers are ego-driven, money-addled individuals who don’t care what I stick in their front yard as long as it impresses their neighbours.”

“Do you have a lot of customers, Bradley?”

Unexpectedly he burst out laughing, a deep belly chuckle that erupted into the staid atmosphere. “You’d be surprised to hear I do.”

“You’re right there. I am surprised.” She watched his snowball cheeks flood with red colour.

“Well, until recently I had a partner, Anke, to do all the PR stuff.”

“A business partner?”

“Business partner, life partner...” He pinched the thin stem of an orchid, making it bow its head. “Partner in a long and tiring divorce.”

“Oh, sorry.” *He doesn’t look like he was married, either.*

He shrugged. “The business has suffered a lot more than I did.”

*Ouch*, Sarah thought.

“But Anke had a way with the customers. Especially the male customers. I think she came across as a kind of Germanic Charlie Dimmock.”

“Who’s Charlie Dimmock?”

“Oh, you don’t get *Ground Force* in Australia?” His eyes gleamed. “Charlie Dimmock’s this big chested lass who doesn’t wear bras. Likes pints. Spends a lot of time pushing wheelbarrows. There’s something about a big bouncy girl pushing a wheelbarrow that really appeals to the English male psyche.”

“Maybe I should move to England.”

“Maybe you should.” He blinked. “Not saying you’re big chested or anything...”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, ugh.” Bradley turned and stared back at the flowers.

She stared at the back of his now ruddy neck, the skin blister-red beneath a spearhead of black fuzz. *He must have to wear a lot of sunscreen, she thought, or he'd burn to a crisp.* “Is it hard to create a new type of orchid?”

He shrugged. “Dead easy, I’ve been told. They’re reckoned to be great little breeders, orchids.” He massaged the orchid’s poked-out tongue with two stumpy fingers. “Get it on with anything.”

“Wanton plants?”

“Now, now, let’s not be judgmental.” He arched an eyebrow at her. “I prefer to think of them as plants with a healthy appetite.”

“Like truffids.”

“Exactly. Just like truffids.” He guffawed. “I’d love to cultivate a few of those in my clients’ gardens.”

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Sarah followed Bradley out into the hotel driveway, a wide loop of concrete dark with recent rain. She heard the heat before she felt it: the dull sizzle of air above the drying asphalt, the fervent chorus of crickets on the island of lawn.

“Bradley!” Carol’s voice echoed along the portico, its sharp edges flattened by the low ceiling.

“Hello, mama.” Bradley smiled thinly at Carol as she bustled towards them, her orange heels coring the plush runner. “You remember Sarah?”

“Of course. Nice to see you again, dear.” Carol placed a firm kiss on Sarah’s cheek.

“You look lovely.” Sarah took in Carol’s apricot dress and necklace; she could sense the ring of matching orange lipstick printed like a wet brand on her cheek.

“Oh well, you do what you can. But it’s very thoughtful of you to say so.” Carol looked pointedly at Bradley.

“What? I said you looked alright, didn’t I?”

“You said I looked ready to entertain the troops.”

Sarah shook her head, trying not to smile. “Men.”

“Indeed,” Carol replied.

“Do you want me to leave while you have this conversation?” Bradley asked.

“Actually, I need you to stay right here. I was just going to send you one of those wretched text thingies. We’re about to head out to Fort Siloso.” Carol glanced over her shoulder at the Major who was standing at the edge of the portico, gazing out at the manicured lawn. His straight-backed stance reminded Sarah of a captain surveying a green ocean; patches of sunlight drifted like currents across the dark grass. A young and slender man was standing near the Major, cleaning the lens of his large camera with a small brush.

“But the guided tour won’t start for ages yet!” Bradley checked his watch; a scratched cover protected a face with a Star Trek insignia emblazoned across it. “I was going to show our Australian friend the frangipani grove.” He pointed along the footpath at a cluster of trees.

“Bradley, I’m sure they have frangipanis in Australia.”

“We used to have them growing at my school. But the flowers were a different colour.” Sarah looked at the rings of brilliant pink flowers hanging like candelabras from the grey boughs of the trees. A thin breeze brought with it the faint scent of frangipani and took her back to her school; placed her momentarily beneath an awning of cream blossoms on a hot summer’s afternoon,



looking along the sweltering mirage of bitumen and waiting, impatiently, for salvation to come in the form of her mother's blue Commodore.

"They seem to get planted in a lot of the cemeteries around here." The young man looked up from his camera. He struck Sarah as being in a state of semi-undress: his beige jacket was resting in the concrete planter beside him, his tie yanked loose around his unbuttoned collar and the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to the elbows. Biceps rippled as he screwed the cap back onto his camera. "Which I think is a nice touch. Kind of brightens up the graves, you know?"

"This is Mr Meehan," Carol said. "He's a press photographer from the UK."

"Jason, please." The *please* slid out as though greased with oil.

"And he's come out to cover the events of the war weekend." Carol glanced at the photographer. "That's right, isn't it?"

"Spot on." He winked at her. "You've been paying attention."

"Oh..." Natural colour burned beneath Carol's rouged cheeks. "Ah, Jason, this is Sarah. She's from Australia."

"G'day *mate*." The photographer's imitation Australian accent had the same effect on Sarah's spine as nails on a blackboard.

"And this is my son, Bradley."

"Hey." The photographer swung his hand into Bradley's as if trying to knock it out the way.

"I am impressed with the size of your zoom." Bradley eyed the elongated apparatus hanging around the man's neck.

"Bradley's also into photography," Carol told the photographer.

“Flowers, mainly.” Bradley squeezed the streamlined bulge of camera in his jeans’ pocket. “And other stationary objects. Nothing that requires a big game lens like yours.”

“Hey, I’ve been flower-spotting myself this weekend. Scouting for red poppies.” The photographer grinned carnivorously at Carol. “It’s how I spotted you.”

Carol’s blush spread to her eye sockets. “Our poppies gave us away, didn’t they, Major?”

“Sorry?” The Major’s turkey neck twisted as though being wrung.

“Jason saw us as we were leaving the brunch.” Carol gestured at the poppy on the lapel of the Major’s jacket; its green wire stem was looped through the buttonhole in a way that made Sarah suspect someone else had done it for him. In comparison the flower pinned to Carol’s breast looked crudely attached, the pin skewering a swatch of delicate fabric. “And your poppy gave you away as a war veteran.”

“I am a marked man.”

“I was delighted to have marked you,” the photographer told the Major. “I was beginning to worry I’d be down on my quota of veterans.”

“You have a quota?” Bradley asked.

“Figure of speech, sorry. It’s just my agency was given to understand there could potentially be thousands of veterans descending on Singapore this weekend. And I was instructed to shoot as many as possible.”

“Bag a brace or two,” Bradley said.

The journalist barked out a laugh. “As it turns out I think the organisers of this weekend were a bit optimistic in their estimates. The veterans have been somewhat thin on the ground.”

“I haven’t seen anyone I used to know,” the Major said huskily.

“Hopefully you’ll see some of your colleagues on the tour today.” Carol rested her hand gently on the Major’s sleeve.

“Be great if you did.” The journalist nodded. “Some reunion shots would be terrific.”

“I...” The Major whooped suddenly and pulled out his handkerchief. “Sorry. Hay fever.” He lifted up his glasses to wipe teary eyes.

“You know what you want to try, Tom?” Bradley asked. “Bit of Vaseline inside the schnauzer. Blocks off the pollen a treat.”

“We could stop off at a chemist and get some,” the photographer said.

“Jason’s going to be sharing a cab with us,” Carol told Bradley. “He wants to take some photos of the Major as he walks into the fort.”

“Record the homecoming.” The photographer turned his canine grin on Bradley, baring white incisors at him. “Capture the Major’s initial reactions to the place where he once served.”

“The Major was stationed at Fort Siloso before the war,” Carol told Sarah. “It was one of a group of coastal forts that made up what was then known as Fortress Singapore.”

“The impenetrable fortress,” Bradley said quietly.

Carol shot Bradley a look. “Fort Siloso’s the only one of those forts that’s been preserved.”

“I should make a note of that.” The photographer pulled a pencil and notepad out of his pocket. “The last British coastal fort in Singapore. That makes the story even more interesting.” He scribbled across a pristine page. “One of our last veterans returning to the last relic of Empire. Gorgeous.” He looked at the Major. “I imagine it’ll stir up some real emotions for you, mate, going back there.”

The Major gaped at the journalist, his lips loose like a punctured bike tyre.

“You realise Fort Siloso has been turned into this big tourist attraction?” Bradley asked.  
“It’s now part of a theme park called Sentosa Island.”

“So, Bradley?” Carol snapped.

“So it doesn’t look anything like it used to. It’s got gift shops and wheelchair ramps and waxworks dummies pretending to fire a cannon.”

“Don’t worry mate.” The photographer’s gaze narrowed slightly. “I know how to line up a shot.” He turned back to the Major. “I expect it will be challenging for you going back to the fort today, though. Seeing how Fortress Singapore has become this symbol of crushing defeat...”

“I don’t know I’d use the word ‘crushing’,” Carol said.

“Still, coming back to Singapore must hold a special pathos for you, Major,” the journalist persisted.

The Major blinked at the journalist. “Sorry?”

“Must have been quite difficult. Coming back to Singapore.” The journalist spoke more slowly.

“Not really. We received money from the National Lottery.” The major smiled at Carol.  
“That paid for most of the airfare...”

“Ooh yes, you might want to make a note of that,” Carol told the journalist. “The National Lotto has been very generous giving out grants to veterans. So they can return to the countries where they served.”

“The *Heroes Return* program.” The Major spoke with sudden relish, his eyes bright through the fog on his glasses.

“It’s a wonderful initiative, it lets veterans go back to the places where they fought in World War II ...”

“Or were imprisoned, in your case.” The journalist flicked his pencil at the Major like the handle of a tiny whip.

“I was interned in Changi.” A strangely apologetic smile played on the Major’s lips as though he was admitting to a minor misdemeanour: to breaking a plate or scratching someone’s car.

“But you fought too, Major,” Carol said. “You had to fight harder if anything.”

“Quite, quite.” The journalist nodded, his pencil still hovering over the page.

“Carol’s father was also in Changi.” Again the Major spoke with strange levity; and grinned at Carol like a schoolboy dobbing in a mate. “Although regrettably we never met.”

“Well, dad was just a private. There’d be no need for you to meet him.” Carol shrugged.

The journalist’s pencil swung like a divining rod towards Carol. “Is your dad about today, mate?”

Carol shook her head. “No, he...” She looked evenly at the journalist.

Sarah noticed a hardness set in her eyes, as though dark film had been applied to her blue irises.

“He died a long time ago,” she said.

The Major sneezed vehemently into his handkerchief, the force of the blast lifting him onto the balls of the feet. “Oh dear.”

“We’ll definitely get you some of that Vaseline,” the photographer told him.

“Excuse me? Madam, sirs?” The doorman waved a gloved hand at the silver taxi rolling along the driveway. “Your cab is here.” He spoke with a surprisingly strong American accent.

“Well.” Carol beamed up at him, tucking a blade of silver hair behind her ear. “*Madam.*”

“Getting it from all sides today, aren’t you mum?” Bradley murmured.

“This way, Madam.” The doorman waved Carol elegantly towards the cab.

“Look at your big sword.” Carol eyed the sabre tucked into the doorman’s cummerbund as she walked stiffly alongside him. “Do you use that on guests who don’t tip properly?”

He patted the gilded hilt. “No, only on those who walk on the lawn.”

Carol’s torso vibrated as she giggled.

“Alright, Tom.” Bradley clapped his hand on the Major’s shoulder. “Ready to board the ship of fools?”

“Ship shape and ready to sail, sir.”

“I hope you have a lovely homecoming,” Sarah told the Major.

He chewed the air with his mouth. “I just hope the underground chambers at Siloso are a little better ventilated now.”

“Oh, they would be, Tom. They’re full of computerised exhibits and all kinds of things that need to be kept cool,” Bradley told him.

“We were never able to keep cool. We had to cut holes in the tops of the doors just to keep the air circulating.” The Major gave a hacking sigh as he ambled towards the car. “Sometimes it got so warm we had to remove our jackets.”

“Ye Gods. It must have been hot.” Bradley shook his head.

The photographer overtook the Major and Carol, shrugging on his retrieved coat as he slid into the front passenger side of the car. He yanked his seatbelt across his chest and looked expectantly up at the doorman, then at Carol. “Oh, did you want the front seat, mate?”

“No, you have it. I should...I should help the Major get in anyway.” Carol reached out to take the arm of the approaching Major.

The doorman shut the front door firmly on the photographer before opening the back one. He spread his hands out in a catching position as the Major clambered stiffly into the car.

“Now, I might just straighten up your tie. In case I forget to do it before your big photography session.” Carol leaned awkwardly over the seated Major, exposing taut blue veins on the backs of her knees.

“Carol, you should have been in the Army.” The Major’s disembodied voice rose from behind Carol’s apricot-coloured frame.

“You think I would have made a good drill sergeant, Major?”

“If your parenting skills are anything to go by.” Bradley looked at Sarah. “I’d invite you to come as well, but I think I already like you too much.”

“Oh...” Sarah said uncertainly.

“Plus I don’t think there’d be room in the cab. One of us would have to end up sitting on my mum’s lap. And I promised my therapist I wouldn’t do that anymore.”

“I’d love to come along, but I...I said I wouldn’t do too much walking around in the heat.”

“I thought that was a national pastime in Australia. Walking around in the heat.”

She shrugged. “I’ve been a bit crook lately. It’s sapped my wandering spirit.”

“Oh, but I can still see the lust in your eyes.” He blinked. “The wanderlust, I mean.”

“Yeah, I know.” Sarah nodded quickly.

“Get in the car, Bradley,” Carol called.

“Get in the car, Bradley.” He turned and lolloped over to the taxi.

“Do you want me to sit in the middle?” Carol asked as he walked around the back of the car.

“No.”

“It’s just I know you get carsick sometimes...”

“No I don’t.” Bradley glanced at Sarah as he yanked the car open.

She gave him two thumbs up.

His eyes widened as he lowered himself into the car, although she was unable to tell if he was smiling or not beneath the gleaming hood. She watched his forehead sink beneath the shimmering surface as though into mercury; a tuft of black hair lingered a moment after the rest of him had vanished.

“Bye, bye dear.” Carol waved vigorously at Sarah as she followed Bradley into the backseat. Her hand reappeared after the doorman had closed the door, jiggling above the departing vehicle like a windsock.

Sarah watched the taxi glide along the driveway. Through the rear window the backseat passengers looked soldered together: Bradley’s hunched shape was bookended by the straight-edged shoulders of Carol and the Major. They shook in unison as the car bumped onto the road.

“Madam?”

Sarah turned around as the doorman walked towards her.

“Did you want me to call you a cab as well?”

“Oh, OK. Yes, I probably should get a cab. I’ve got cab vouchers I need to use up.” She pulled the wad of vouchers out of her pocket.

“Wonderful.” His dark eyes shone. “You could take a taxi to Malaysia.”



“I could?”

“It’s just across the causeway.”

“Gosh.” She shook her head. “Only I’d need to be back at my hotel by lunchtime.”

“So you should probably stay closer to home.”

“Yes.”

He folded his hands behind his back, surveying the congested road beyond the lawn. His sword rose on his hip like the tail of a thylacine. “There’s a lot to do in Chinatown. Although it would probably be as quick to walk there as to take a taxi. The one-way system here means you can’t get anywhere fast.” He looked aslant at her. “But if you have to use up your vouchers...”

“Those were the instructions.” She watched a cluster of black birds sail across a borehole of clear sky, ducking and twisting as though trying to plunge into the oasis. *As the crow flies*, she thought. “Is it a nice walk to Chinatown?”

“If you go through Fort Canning Park, yes, it’s a nice walk. Fort Canning is a very nice park to walk through. Your only worry is that it might start raining again.” The doorman glanced up; his white cap was luminous beneath the underbelly of ashen cloud. “It rains all the time in Singapore.”

“I like walking when it’s about to rain. There’s that nice feeling that, I don’t know, something’s about to happen.” A hot breeze rippled across the portico and Sarah tasted the frail scent of frangipani again; she saw herself fleetingly as someone younger and fresher and animated by an impending arrival to the point where she was almost dancing on the pavement.

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The path leading through the park was wide and immaculately hedged, with iron lampposts standing sentinel along a wall of pruned agapanthus; behind the orderly picket line it looked to Sarah like a riot of foliage had broken out. The trunks of enormous Rain Trees were being besieged by armies of ferns; spike-winged creatures had sprouted between aerial grey roots, nested in the joins of lichen-crusting trunks. Brown creepers dropped from the trees' great limbs as if they were being lashed to the earth.

The path led Sarah to an ashen stone gateway that seemed out of place amongst its lush surroundings. The low entrance was fortified by thick buttresses and topped by a Gothic arch with pointed turrets; the letters *IHS* were carved beneath a cross. The gateway looked like it belonged to the entrance of a castle courtyard; instead it opened onto a great expanse of lawn. The manicured sweep ran up the slope of a hill to a long building that looked like a colonial army barracks; its cross-barred windows were set back behind high white balconies, sheltered by tiled red roofs. A red banner flying in front of the fort advertised a new production by Singapore Dance Theatre; a blue one proclaimed a forthcoming series of cooking classes.

As Sarah pulled out her water bottle a jogger with wet black hair pounded past her along the path, his gasps sawing the air, the white cord of his iPod luminous against his soaked grey chest. He stared open-mouthed at Sarah, his face bloodless, his eyes glassy and unfocused. She smiled apologetically and turned around to conceal herself drinking; her gaze fell on the long wall bordering the lawn. A series of stone plaques was mounted in the wall, glimmering in the ruddy brick like windows looking out on grey sky. The first plaque was blank, marked only with mould spreading up the porous stone like smoke from a ghostly campfire. *OUR WILLIE* was gouged fiercely into the next headstone; dark lichen emphasised the black year of *1856*.

She walked up mossy steps punctuated with protruding roots. Some headstones were bare, some topped with crosses or Stars of David; some had Latin phrases and poetry inscribed at the base. One headstone was set in flesh-coloured marble with the word *SACRED* written in Gothic calligraphy across the top. The exaggerated last line, *AGED 27 YEARS*, shouted like a final protest.

Orange lichen had burrowed into the lettering on another blackened headstone: *IN MEMORY OF JAMES WILSON*. Sarah read on.

*WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE*

*ON THE 25<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 1849*

*AGED 11 YEARS, 7 MONTHS*

*AND 15 DAYS*

*This Stone is erected by*

*His bereaved Mother*

Beyond the wall she could hear the foliage humming with birds and insects; further off, children laughing. At the foot of the boy's memorial a large frond was poking through a crack in the rotting mortar, stretching dark leaves up towards the headstone as if to caress it.

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The cab driver dropped her opposite her hotel; as she waited for a break in the three lanes of traffic she was struck by how squat and ugly the building looked in the daylight. Without the beacons spouting like giant columns of water up its flank it had the appearance of a socialist response to a housing crisis: its concrete facade a utilitarian shade of sand, the tiers of high iron balustrades seemingly designed to deter jumping. Black curtains were drawn behind rows of tinted

windowpanes in an extra line of defence against the sunlight. The hotel sign that had blazed electric in the night sky was now the tawdry blue of a drained swimming pool.

The break came and she jogged across the road; the short burst of exertion made her again reach for her water bottle and drain its tepid dregs. She slotted through the gap between two of the rounded bushels of pot-plant and into the slightly more elegant enclave of the hotel; the cement portico blocked out the harsh sunlight, deepening the colour of the hotel wall to a rich salmon. A mural of geometric shapes, steel circles and triangles and pentagons, ran like an alien cipher up to the entranceway.

A woman in a blue pantsuit was sitting straddled on a sandstone bench, talking quickly into a mobile phone. Beside her a small brown-haired boy was running a toy truck repeatedly back and forward over her sandalled foot. Further along an elderly couple was sitting on a bench behind a water feature, a smoking quartz ball spinning on a limestone crag. The woman was smoking a cigarette; the man stared at the orb as if mesmerized. His grey flannel pocket suddenly beeped and he leaned heavily to one side, fishing out a slender silver phone. He peered downward, his mouth open as if intending to swallow the device. "It's from Leslie. Says she's spotted a wooded thrush-owl."

"Best call the papers, then." The woman exhaled through flared nostrils; smoke and chalk-coloured steam buffeted her partner's face.

The foyer doors whooshed grudgingly half-open as Sarah approached, shutting quickly behind her. She stepped through a purging screen of air-conditioning that made the muscles in her head contract like a band.

Paul was sitting in the far corner of the foyer with his back to her; she only recognised him by the strands of ginger hair that had broken free from his skullcap of gel. He didn't look around as she approached but kept staring at the pond in front of him, a vacant expression on his face, his eyes glassy as the surface of the water. She had the fleeting sensation of looking at someone she didn't know: a stranger she was meeting for the first time.

He glanced up at her, his face making the slow transition to recognition, his frown becoming a smile that continued to droop at the edges. "Hey."

"You looked like you were off in your own world."

"Just having a moment." He massaged his dull eyes.

"How did your morning go?"

"The air-conditioning packed in about ten."

"Bugger."

"By the end of the morning you could see the belt of green steam hanging over the room." He stood up slowly, reaching for the jacket slung across the edge of the bench. "So, I've made a reservation."

"Hello, by the way." Sarah held out her arms.

He looked blankly at her before giving her a quick squeeze. "You're warm."

"I'm probably sunburnt."

He leaned back, scrutinising her face. "No, you're alright."

"I spent quite a bit of time outside. There was this street market in Chinatown that I got kind of stuck at. It's funny how you don't notice the heat so much when you're shopping."

"I haven't seen the light of day." Paul patted himself down, checking for bulges of wallet and Blackberry.

"You would have liked this one stall, Paul. It was all Karaoke music. It had a Karaoke version of *Riders on the Storm* playing..."

"So it's a place Rollo recommended."

"Huh?"

“The reservation. It’s for a place Rollo recommended. By the river, so it should be nice.” He rubbed his nostril and sniffed as if taking snuff. “Although the food might take a while to come out.”

“We don’t have to go anywhere posh. If you’re on the clock we could just go back to Chinatown. They had a whole street full of food stands.” She thought about the long row of racing-green carts lining the middle of the packed mall, steamy windows allowing tantalising peeps at culinary spreads: plump white buns resting on glistening noodles, fat prawns floating in clay-coloured sauce, turgid dhosas oozing cream. “That way you could get a bit of sun too.”

“I’d rather go somewhere we didn’t have to clear our own table.” A toy tip-truck ran into Paul’s foot. “What the...”

“Whirr!” The small boy grabbed the banked truck and leapt over Paul’s brogue, careering into the edge of the pond.

“Cheers, mate, I just polished that.” Paul scowled at the back of the boy’s head.

“Paul.” Sarah glanced at the exit. “I think his mum’s outside. Maybe we should go get her.”

“If she’s not worrying about him, I don’t see why we should be.” Paul checked his Rolex. “And we really need to get going.”

“Brum, Brumm...” The boy lifted the truck up over his head before plunging it head first into the pond. “Brum!” He lifted the truck back up into the air as though performing a rescue mission; water poured out of its hollow cabin, spun through its rubber wheels.

“Hey, cut that out, mate.” Paul took a step towards the child. “You’ll scare the fish.”

“Fish?” The boy’s head spun around, his page-boy bob flapping against his ears. “What fish?”

“What fish do you reckon? The one that lives in there.” Paul waved his finger at the undulating water.

“There wouldn’t be any fish in there, would there?” Sarah eyed the rippling basin doubtfully; its surface looked thick and oleaginous as if covered with Clingwrap.

“Sure there is. I was watching it do the rounds while I was waiting for you.” He smiled wryly. “Thinking how nice it would be to have a five-second memory.”

The boy leaned out over the water; his silhouette oozed like a slick of oil across the basin. “There’s no fish in there, you dummy.”

Paul raised an eyebrow at the boy. “OK, genius.” He knelt on the basalt ledge, balancing on one spindly knee. His grey trouser leg rose on his hairy calf, a bunched tube of striped sock. “Then what’s that?”

The boy followed the line of Paul’s outstretched finger. “Whoa!”

“You see?” Paul looked triumphantly down at the child.

“It’s a shark!” The boy donkey-kicked his hind legs up in amazement.

“No, it’s a goldfish.”

“But it’s massive!”

Sarah leaned over Paul’s shoulder, looking into the water. Submerged yellow lanterns shone on the underwater walls of the tub, casting sooty beams across the depths. Something large and jet black suddenly swam through a shaft of light, disrupting silt and coins with its tail. “It is a pretty big goldfish.”

“They keep growing if you feed them,” Paul told her. “They grow to about twelve inches.”

Sarah watched the light catch the creature’s black belly, highlighting seams of gold. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I had goldfish when I was a kid.” He played abstractly with her hand. “And twelve inches is kind of a magic number for guys.”

“But the fish is black!” The boy’s face scrunched up in puzzlement.

“So?” Paul asked.

“So it’s not a goldfish.”

“Goldfish don’t have to be gold.”

The frown deepened in the boy’s tiger eyes as he tried to resolve the conundrum; giving up, he turned and ran along the edge of the basin, truck clutched firmly against his side. “Fishy...”

Sarah glanced across the pond, trying to discern other shapes moving in the inky water. “It’s a pity for the fish if it’s in there by itself.”

“I only ever had one fish at a time. The one time I put two fish in a tank together one of them ate the other one.”

“You’re kidding me.”

The wire-thin smile split his face like a cheese-cutter. “I got two goldfish for my birthday: Bert and Ernie. Bert was the big one and Ernie was the spotty little. I remember thinking how much Bert liked Ernie because he kept, you know, nudging him.” He jerked his head to the side, dislodging more tufts of hair; they stood irate like twigs stuck in clay. “Giving him little kisses on his tail. And then one morning I went to see Bert and Ernie and only Bert was left. And little pieces of Ernie were scattered across the surface of the tank.”

“Oh, Paul.” She covered her mouth with her hand.

He shook his head. “I can still see it, you know, the bits of dismembered Ernie bobbing on the water. I thought maybe they were fish food until I saw his tail...it had got stuck in the filter somehow and was flapping like a spotty flag...it’s not funny.”



She bit her lip. “No, I know. It’s terrible.”

“And the worst part was Bert was carrying on like everything was normal, just floating around with shreds of Ernie hanging out of his mouth...”

“Oh, Paul.” She bent over to give him a hug, inhaling the dull scent of fading aftershave. “How traumatic.”

He sighed involuntarily as she squeezed him tighter. “I suppose it was a good life lesson.”

“What? Kill or be killed?”

“Yeah, and don’t name anything that might end up getting eaten.”

“Fish!” The boy slapped the water with the underside of his truck.

“Hey, steady mate.” Paul glanced at the boy. “You won’t make friends with it if you do that.”

The child stared evenly back at Paul before slowly placing the truck down on the ledge. “Fish,” he murmured meditatively as he began to wheel it along.

Sarah rested both hands on Paul’s shoulders. “I like the thought of you having pets.”

“What, you think I’m too much of a hard-nosed computer guy to have pets?”

“I didn’t say that.” She rested her chin on his plastered scalp. “I just thought they might be more of the Tamagotchi variety.”

Paul watched the boy trailing his tiny fingers through the water. “Kids like fish, don’t they?”

“They seem to like all animals.”

“Anything dumber than them.”

“Paul.” She swatted his arm.

“I always loved my goldfish when I was a kid.” He cocked his head to the side. “Maybe we should get one when we get home. A goldfish, that is.”

“That might be nice. Having something that relied on us to stay alive could be good for us.”

“Just one fish, though.” He squeezed her hand. “I’m not ready to relive my childhood trauma.”

“Sure.” She watched the boy’s fingers wiggling like enticing worms through the water. His head was bowed; a whorl of white scalp hung like the eye of a galaxy on the crown of his dark head. Warmth spread unexpectedly in her stomach. “We’d definitely want to start with one.”

“Whirr...” The boy reversed his truck into the water.

“Hey, mate, come on.” Paul sat up sharply, making Sarah’s chin slide off his head. “I just said no playing in the water, didn’t I?”

“Paul, it’s OK.” Sarah patted his shoulders. “We’ll just go get his mum.”

“Whirr.” The boy lifted the filled truck upwards and swung it as though striking at a ball. An arc of water splashed Paul’s jacket.

He jumped up, his arms raised. “Oh, you little demon!”

“Paul!” She watched the boy collapse into a ball as though knocked over by the force of the explosion; huge dark eyes peered out over raised knees.

“Well, look what he did!” Paul spun around, displaying the lapels of his splashed jacket. “That will stain!”

“Dougal!” The boy’s mother leaned into the foyer, her lower half remaining outside; wisps of smoke rose like frost into the air vent.

Sarah watched the boy belt across the space, ploughing into the mother's thigh with a force that made her stagger backwards.

"I told you to stay with me." The woman shuffled out of sight, her leg braced in a calliper of child.

Sarah waited for her to vanish before turning to Paul. "You should go out there and apologise."

"For what? Providing free child care?" Paul gestured at the door. "She should have been looking after that kid herself!"

"You should say sorry for yelling at him like that!" Sarah looked down at the truck lying askew on the wet tiles. "He was in such a hurry to get away from us he left his truck behind!"

"Well, I'm so sorry if I'm not in the mood for having little brats throwing stuff at me!"

"It's just water, Paul." She pushed past him.

"It's tank water. It smells. It'll probably leave a stain."

She squatted down to pick up the abandoned truck.

"I'll have to give my presentation smelling like a fish tank." He paused. "Look, I didn't mean to snap like that."

She stood up too quickly and the dots burned like cinders on her pupils.

"I'm just tired and and overworked."

She waved the truck over the pond. Excess drops of silty water splashed her arm. "I know."

"And the water really does stink. If I wasn't going back into a room full of mouth-breathers I'd be going up to change." He sighed. "Maybe we should wait a while on the goldfish."

She nodded slowly. "Yeah, maybe."

“Until things are less nuts. Even goldfish can be quite a big commitment, you have to scrub their tanks out a lot.” He sniffed. “I’d hate to get tank water on the new carpet.”

“Or the new sofa.” She inhaled sharply, trying to rekindle the warmth in her suddenly leaden stomach.

“Exactly. At least until I’ve paid it off.” He clicked his tongue. “Right, you hungry?”

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“*Istana Malay Restaurant.*” Sarah read the neon pink sign glowing on the blue wall of the restaurant. “Hey, this looks nice.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Pleasantly surprised.” Sarah stared along the row of restaurants lining the quay. Their fronts were garishly painted like a row of beach huts, their boundaries marked out by white pickets, bamboo thatch, raised timber decking. “This whole strip’s nice, actually.”

“Took long enough to get here though.” Paul frowned at his watch. “We definitely got taken on the tourist route.”

“There’s a one-way system here, apparently.” She watched him scrutinise the front of his jacket. “There’s no marks, Paul.”

A young waitress in a high-necked black uniform walked up to them. “Two for lunch?”

“Reservation under Watt.” Paul smiled tightly.

“Would you like to sit inside or outside?”

“Ins...” Paul began to say.

“Outs....” Sarah looked at Paul. “Did you want to go inside?”

“We can sit outside if you like.”

In the open-air section of the restaurant white-clothed tables were clustered along the edge of the river, sheltered by large pink umbrellas. “We get a view of the river if we sit outside.”

“Outside is fine, Sarah.”

“We’ll sit outside, thanks,” Sarah told the waitress.

“This way please.” The waitress paused at her station to pick up a couple of large black menus. Beneath the chrome bench a refrigerated case was laden with desserts: chocolate cakes with glistening beads of moisture, slurries of trifle in frosted glass bowls, plates stacked with dusty brownies and pastel-coloured sweets. In the middle of the spread rings of melon and pineapple were arranged around an orange nucleus of papaya.

“I think we should go straight for dessert,” Sarah said.

Paul looked startled. “I think we’ll only have time for a main, Sarah.”

“It was a joke, Paul.”

The waitress led them to a square table pressed against a low black fence.

“Oooh, lovely.” Sarah sat down in the seat the waitress pulled out for her and looked across the river. The wide expanse of water sparkled with the reflected colours of the cityscape: the fuggy blue sky, the white and bottle green obelisks of the skyscrapers lining the bank. On the other side Sarah could see another row of gaudily painted restaurants fronted with tables and umbrellas, a tent city of brilliant white canvas stretching along the dock. “Nice view.”

“Can I get you something to drink?” The waitress handed them their menus.

“Just lots of water.” Paul yanked another button open on his shirt.

“A bottle of water.” The waitress nodded and looked at Sarah. “With two glasses?”

“I’ll have a vodka and tonic,” said Sarah.

“I’ll need a receipt for that,” Paul told the waitress.

Sarah looked over the railing at the bank of the river below. A slick of water was oozing across the shingle towards the dark wall of the pier, the grey stone blocks sooty with mildew. “In London I saw people fossicking along the Thames at low tide. Apparently they used to find all kinds of amazing stuff. Viking weapons, Roman coins, all sorts.” She inhaled the dank smell of the porous bricks. “I wonder what you’d find if you went fossicking here.”

“Holy crap.” Paul raised an eyebrow at the menu. “There’s no way we’re doing dessert, Sarah.”

Sarah looked back at Paul. “You know, I’m not that hungry suddenly.”

“You lose your appetite in this heat.”

“OK, Paul, we’ll move, shall we?” Sarah raised her hands. “We’ll sit inside.”

“No, no, you’ve gotta have your view.” His lip curled as he read down the menu. “I’m paying for it.”

“You mean Paragon is paying for it.”

A young man with crew-cut black hair walked up to their table with a tray of drinks. “OK. A vodka and tonic. And a bottle of water.” The man placed a carafe and two glasses in the centre of the table, half-filling both of them with water. “And are you ready to hear the specials?” He took an anticipatory breath.

“I think we’ll just stay with the regular menu, mate,” Paul said.

“OK, I’ll give you a minute.” The waiter clasped his hands and bowed slightly before walking away.

“Rollo can’t stretch to the specials?”

“Sarah, don’t get pissy about me claiming this.” Paul sculled his water.

“Oh, I think it’s very *sensible*.” She reached for her vodka. “But if you’re going to claim our meal as entertainment expenses you might try a bit harder with the entertainment.”

He opened the water bottle with a pop. “Suddenly this feels like work.”

“Going out with me is work, is it?” Sarah slugged vodka.

Paul poured slowly. “Actually, work would be less stressful.”

“How are we going?” The waitress held up her order pad, her pen aslant on the face like the arm on a sundial.

“Still looking.” Sarah smiled until the waitress turned her back. “Maybe you should just go back and hang with the computer geeks. Go hit things with a hammer or whatever it is you do for kicks.”

“See, I think you’re jealous, Sarah. I think you’re actually jealous of me for doing something I care about. That I’m not just stuck somewhere I don’t want to be, doing a job I hate.”

“I don’t hate my job.”

“Whenever I ask how your day’s been you always say the same thing, that it was boring and irritating and you couldn’t wait to get out.” He crunched down on ice. “It wouldn’t hurt you to ask me how my day was occasionally, by the way.”

“I wouldn’t want to know.”

“Ready to ...” The waiter returned, his voice trailing off as he saw Paul’s face.

“Just one more minute,” Paul said gruffly.

“I’ll have another of these.” Sarah held out her empty glass.

Paul watched the waiter leave. “You’re paying for the next one.”

“The hell I am.”

“You crap on my job but you’re willing to exploit it.”

“Paul, it’s a bloody drink.”

“And lunch. And a subsidised hotel room and flight.” He looked at her. “And pretty much everything we own.”

“Oh, here we go.”

“Well, it’s true Sarah! My *boring* job has been subsidising your part-time lifestyle the whole time we’ve been going out! Let you keep doing those big eighteen hour weeks!”

“And that has always been so shocking to you.” Sarah shook her head. “That I am not just desperate to have money and accumulate *stuff*.”

“You haven’t needed to accumulate it. I’ve accumulated it for both of us.”

“Yeah, flooded the house with crap we don’t need.”

“Like chairs. And tables. And a fridge.”

“And how happy we are, now we are surrounded by whitegoods.”

“Jesus, Sarah, you know why you have this attitude?” He sunk back in his chair. “Because you’re spoiled.”

The waiter returned with a slightly less full glass of vodka and tonic. “OK, and…”

“Not quite ready to order.” Sarah grabbed the glass before he could set it down and raised it to her mouth, jabbing her eyebrow with the pink swizzle stick. “You go to hell, Paul.”



“You don’t like to hear it, but you are. You think owning stuff is so beneath you, but that’s because you’ve never had to worry about it. Everything’s always been handed to you.” He paused. “Even your mum said that.”

“*What?*” She stared at him.

“She said she worried, sometimes, because you were so bad with money..”

“Are you seriously trying to bring *my dead mother* into the fight, Paul?” Sarah hissed.

“I’m just saying she thought you were a dreamer.”

“You have no idea what she thought about anything. About absolutely anything.”

“She told me how it was when you were travelling, Sarah! That you were always calling up broke from overseas, talking quickly to beat the beeps on the payphone. She said she had so many candles burning for you the priest offered to reserve a rack for her.”

“You are just bullshitting, Paul. You are just making stuff up to get at me...”

He stared at her. “Sarah, she, I mean, she wasn’t having a go.”

“But you are.” Sarah pushed her chair back from the table, the metal limbs protesting on the concrete. “You hurtful bloody bastard.”

His eyes narrowed. “She also said I’d have to get used to your toilet mouth.”

She threw her water in his face.

Paul scrunched up his eyes as the water slapped him, jerking his neck to the side and raising a hand as if to ward off a blow.

The conversations on the tables stopped like a record getting yanked off a turntable.

Sarah stumbled away; she made it past the frozen montage of diners, the stunned waiters and the whirring cake cabinet before the tears started flowing.

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“Where are you even going to go?” Paul asked.

Sarah punched the clothes down into her pack.

“You’re being stupid.”

The blinding tears started again and Sarah rubbed her eyes angrily, trying to stem the flow.

“What are you going to do, Sarah, go to another hotel? You don’t have enough...”

“I’m going to a hostel, Paul.” Sarah grabbed her nightgown and rolled it into a ball, shoving in into a corner of her pack. “Where people without a lot of *money* go.”

Paul sat down on the corner of the bed, springs rippling across the tightly-strung mattress. “Just stop being so melodramatic, will you?”

“This is not me being melodramatic.” She banged her pack up and down on the ground; the clothes sunk deeper into the dark recess.

“No, you’re right, that was earlier at the restaurant.” Paul kicked the bed leg hard with his heel. “You’re lucky they didn’t call the police, you know. They take public bad behaviour seriously here. We could have ended up getting arrested or something.”

“Great. We would have been put in separate cells.”

“Look, Sarah, I’m prepared to get over being publicly baptised. For the second time in a day.”

“I guess you just make people want to throw stuff at you, Paul.”

“OK, fine, whatever. Go to your hostel, start the revolution, do what you like.” He stood up, taking the single step from the bed to the door. “I’ve got to get back to the real world.”

“Regards to the other androids.”

Paul took a step towards her. “Sarah, just...”

“Go away, Paul.”

“Fine. Going.” He turned and slipped, careering into the door and landing hard on his shoulder. “Ahhh!” He slumped against the door, his eyes glassy with pain.

“Is that your bad shoulder?”

He nodded stiffly.

“What did you slip on?” She looked at the floor; the creased cover of the travel brochure she’d been reading was peeking out from beneath the bed. “Oh.” She bit her lip. “I forgot that was there.”

“Why wouldn’t it be there?” Paul hissed through clenched teeth. “Why wouldn’t something of yours be on the floor?”

“Do you, I dunno, want some ice or something?” She glanced at the mini-bar.

He shook his head.

“Do you want me to give your shoulder a rub?”

“No.” He stuck out his spare hand, his voice hoarse. “I don’t want you to come near it.” His eyes rolled upwards like a martyred Saint Sebastian.

“Um...” Sarah bit her lip harder, suddenly wanting to grin. “I thought the shoulder-pads in your jacket would have cushioned the impact a bit.”

“Sarah, for once in your life know when to shut up.”

She looked at the strip of shirt exposed beneath his open jacket, imagining arrows piercing the white cotton, rivulets of blood seeping through the cloth. “Here, let me kiss it better, Paul.”

He pressed himself against the door. “Keep away from me, Sarah.”

She stood in front of him, slipping her hand under his jacket, sliding it up his torso. His flesh was hot through the thin weave of his shirt, his fingers clamped on his shoulder blade like a knot of roots growing over cement. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry if it hurts.” She kissed the tip of his ring finger, her tongue brushing the flavourless callused skin.

“You have no idea how much it hurts.”

She leaned closer, encountering with surprise a swollen groin. “Well.” She looked up at him. “The pain can’t be too bad.”

His eyes widened, pixels sparking like fissures in grey diamonds, and she thought how much his aroused expression made him look like he was afraid. She rubbed her hand over the puckered corners of his eyes, the tight skin on his forehead, thinking, *Alive, alive*.

He sighed and leaned forward, swallowing her mouth, sucking her tongue so hard the muscles at the back of her throat ached.

She staggered backwards and he fell on top of her, his legs clumsily splayed off the end of the bed, his cold belt buckle branding her stomach. She pushed his face off hers and licked his neck, swallowing the flavours: salt and aftershave and dribbled minty toothpaste.

*Alive*, she thought.

He slid onto his knees, bending down to go between hers, but she pulled him back up, unbuttoning his shirt, sucking the cooling sweat off his exposed chest as she worked towards his crotch, wanting him naked on top of her, enveloping her like a hot blanket.

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Paul sang softly as he stood in the bathroom, spraying on deodorant, dusting the tongues of fiery hair licking at his armpit. “*Come on baby light my fire...*”

“Let poor Jim rest in peace, Paul.” Sarah yawned into the bed sheet tucked under her chin.

“*Try to set the night on...*” He yanked his trousers forward, spraying the gap.

“Gah.” His head jerked to the side. “That stings.”

Sarah rolled onto her back, watching the oscillating panels of the air conditioner. The black spaces between the white slats grew larger as the vent exhaled its frosty breath; she could just make out rings of silver pulsating in the dark. “It’s unnerving how you always start channelling Jim Morrison after sex.”

“I like to think I’m channelling him during sex.”

“That would explain why you called out that other chick’s name.”

“Huh?” He set the can down with a clank.

“I joke, Paul.” She watched the frown slowly, not entirely, clear in his eyes. *We’re not quite at the joking stage yet*, she thought.

“Maybe you should get in the habit of holding up ‘LAUGH’ signs at the right moment.” He yawned as he stepped to the wardrobe. “Man, I am...”

“Shagged?”

“Well shagged.” He flicked a pressed shirt.

She studied the splodges on his back, the grip-marks angled like gills on his pale waist. “We haven’t done that for a while, have we?”

“What?”

The cruel marks vanished, mercifully, behind a veil of white shirt. “Gone the...” She stopped herself saying *angry*. “The make-up sex route.”

Paul tucked the baggy shirt into the baggy trousers pooled around his ankles. He reminded her of an adolescent putting on the borrowed clothes of an older man, trying desperately to hide the discrepancies in the sizing. “We haven’t gone the old afternoon delight route in a while either.” His grin, as he turned around, was that of a sheepish fourteen-year-old.

“No. Not for a while.” She smiled awkwardly back at him as she stretched, tracing snow-wings on the starched sheets.

“Not that I’m complaining.” He nudged his brogue along the floor with his socked foot.

“Me neither.” The pillows scattered around her were grazed with intermingled hairs: shorter ginger wires kinked like hairpins, longer strands of brown curled into split ends. *The cleaner won’t be able to find all of them*, she thought, half disgusted and half satisfied, *when she changes the sheets*. “I think there’s something about a business hotel room that really lends itself to daytime sex. Sets the right kind of seedy atmosphere.”

He squatted, whipping up bows of shoelaces. “Suits the whole lady of leisure thing you’ve got going on there.”

“As well as the business man who shoots and leaves thing.”

He blinked.

*Definitely not at the joking stage*. She watched him do a kamikaze roll for his suitcase. The right side of her stomach burbled under her rib-cage; the sound was answered a moment later by a gurgle near her left hip.

“You OK?”

She rubbed her belly. “That’s the liquid lunch talking.”

“I’m sorry you missed out on lunch, Sarah.” He swung his tie over his head as if preparing to skip.

“It was as much my doing as yours.” She pictured his angry face again, red against the sea of white tablecloths: the memory stung. She forced it down. “I’m sorry you missed out on lunch, too. You probably need it more than me.”

“I’ll be OK. There’ll be food for Africa back at the conference.” He folded his collar down with the precision of an origami worker. “Enough to keep all those lactose-intolerant colons bubbling over...”

“Oh, Pauly.” She threw the sheet over her head.

“And there should be plenty of food at the conference fiesta tonight.” His voice buzzed through the weave.

*The conference fiesta.* Her stomach growled tetchily.

“Sarah? You haven’t forgotten the conference fiesta tonight?”

“It’s ringed in my diary, Paul.” The sheet spread the hot words across her face.

“I bet it is.”

“If there’s one thing in the world I love more than a conference function, it’s a conference *fiesta*.”

He sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. “You’re OK to dress in a Latin theme?”

“I think I forgot to pack my toga.”

“What?” She could hear him thinking about it. “*Latin American*, Sarah.”

She flipped the sheet off her face. “I brought a shawl with me that’s sort of Mexican-looking. Well, it’s black.”

He looked worried.

“We’re not really expected to get all dressed up, are we?”

“Marg seemed to think it would be good to wear proper costumes. You know, that it would be polite to the conference organisers. I think she said she’d got an outfit made especially.”

“Of course she has.” Sarah rolled her eyes.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Marg’s such a fricking soiree woman, isn’t she? She’s always throwing those *Vogue Living*-inspired parties...”

“How would you know what her parties are like? You never come to any of them!”

“I came to her Christmas bash. That was enough.” Sarah recalled the foyer of Marg’s and Rollo’s hilltop home that had felt to her, strangely, like a kind of post-modern nativity scene: the stained timber decking reminiscent of a wet stable floor; the plain furniture, wicker chairs and sofas swaddled in plain white cloth, adorned with gold and purple throws like the gifts of departed wise men. White plaster walls had supported a glass apex ceiling, through which the stars had sparkled with almost biblical clarity.

“What was wrong with the Christmas party?”

She remembered the punch-bowl gleaming on its dais like a glass manger. “I felt like an orphan invited to the manor house for Christmas.”

“Marg likes being generous.” He glared at her. “You’re negative about everything she does.”

“I just don’t believe in free lunches, Paul,” she replied, surprised by his offended expression. “Or Christmas dinners.”

“Just because you work somewhere where they make you pay for your own teabags.” He sniffed. “Marg’s picked up on your absenteeism, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s noticed that you haven’t been to any of her recent parties.”



“Has she said something to you?”

He busied himself with his tie. “I just mean she’s always commenting to the other guys how much she enjoyed meeting their partners. And then with me she just goes silent.”

“Paul, I’ve had more important things to do lately than go to Marg’s stupid parties!”

“Oh, fine, Sarah.” The tie end slapped him in the face. “Point taken. Maybe you should stay in tonight.”

“Pauly...”

“Seeing you haven’t even bothered with a costume.” He yanked his jacket out of the wardrobe like a bouncer pulling someone out of a line-up. “Maybe I should just go out and get a frock myself.”

She barked out a laugh.

His glare deepened.

“Paul, don’t go off mad.”

“I’m too stressed to be mad.” He punched his arm into his jacket.

“Well, don’t go off stressed.”

“Tonight’s important to me, OK?”

“I know, OK? I know.” She paused. “But you can’t leave me behind. I’m your secret salsa weapon. I’ve been practising the moves that will drive the gringos wild.”

“Humph.” He shrugged his jacket on.

“I’ve got this special lambada thing worked out for your boss.” She rolled onto her knees and pulled him towards her by the lapels.

“Which boss?” He grunted. “I have so many.”

She kissed his cheek. “Look, what if I said I would spend my afternoon finding an amazing outfit for tonight?”

“Really?”

“Yes.” She squeezed his cheeks.

“God, that would make me feel a lot better.”

“I know, and that’s why I’ll do it.”

He stuck his hand excitedly into his pocket. “Can I give you some cash?”

“I don’t need cash. I have cash.” She watched him rifle through the wad of papery notes in his wallet. “And accepting money from you while I’m naked in a hotel bed just doesn’t feel right.”

He waved a large note in front of her eyes. “Hey, you earned every last cent of this.”

“Fuck off.” She swatted his arm.

He grinned as he dropped the second note on its twin; the air-conditioning blew them into a cross.

“Paul, come here.” She raised her arms. “Give me a hug before you leave. So I don’t feel so much like a kept woman.”

“Alright.” He leaned towards her. “And you tell me something nice so I don’t feel like an insensitive business prat.”

“I, um...” She raised herself higher to hold him and her head spun.

“If you take too long the exercise will be redundant.”

“Alright.” She balanced her head on his shoulder. “I’m really glad you were still willing to sleep with me after I tipped water on you in public.”

He gave a startled chuckle. “Sarah, you have a lot to learn about male behaviour. You could have hit me with a car-jack and I still would have been willing to sleep with you.”

“That is actually perhaps the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

He patted her side awkwardly, targeting the non-erogenous mid section.

“As well as a little risky, the way my moods are at the moment...”

“Mine aren’t that great,” he said gruffly. “And I know you’ve had other stuff going on that has been more important than going to my work parties.”

“But that’s why I like the idea of going to your work party. It’s a sign that things are getting back to normal.” The word *normal* made her think of a diver plummeting through open space, trying to discern the line between sea and sky.

“I’m not sure how a bunch of IT nerds attempting to find their Latin soul is going to relate to normal.” His phone beeped.

“Better get that,” she murmured after a moment.

“It’ll just be work wanting to know my ETA.”

*Work*, she thought, *ETA. IT nerds*. The words steadied her like anchors. “Well, you better tell them.” She prodded the back of his neck. “Go on, get out of here. You’ve served your purpose.”

He squeezed her tighter before jumping off the bed. “Oh, I feel so used.”

“Get used to it, honey-buns.”

His smile broadened as he grabbed his phone. “And you call my employers ruthless.”

“Only when they’re not around.” *We’ll get back to normal soon*, she thought; relief spread through her like a shot of whiskey.

“Ah.” Paul pulled a face at the screen of his phone. “Yes, Marg, I will be back in plenty of time for my presentation. Thanks so much for frigging bugging me about it again.” He shook the phone hard as if trying to shake Marg’s text out of it.

Watching the unit catch the light made Sarah's head begin to spin again. The wind whistled in her ears and she focused on Paul's stationary torso, willing him to remain steady until the sensation of falling passed.

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The hotel foyer looked drab without its supply of morning sunlight; flecks of dust floated in dun beams as though the air needed vacuuming. The woman standing at the unattended counter was a striking figure in white, her long-sleeved shirt and peasant skirt brilliant in the gloom. Steel bangles slid like curtain rings along her arm as she flicked open her phone; her gaze slid on into Sarah's face.

*Oh, it's Marg, Sarah thought. Bugger.*

Marg stared back at her through narrowed eyes; Sarah sensed she was thinking the same thing. "Sarah." She smiled languidly; her forehead remained frozen. "Hello."

"Hello, Marg."

They bumped awkwardly as they exchanged air-kisses. Marg's chest was hard as a plate; she was wearing perfume that smelled like orange blossoms. "Nice to see you looking so well, Sarah."

"You're looking well too, Marg." *She really is, the cow*, Sarah thought, studying Marg's bronzed face, her glowing green eyes. Brilliant sunsets of eye shadow arched across plucked brows, gold folding into tangerine and rose.

"Thank you." Marg appraised Sarah's face as if searching for something to compliment. "Yoga."

"Sorry?"

“I owe it all to yoga.” Marg spread her arms wide open; light shone through her tunic, giving her a vaguely messianic appearance. “Since I started practising yoga I’ve dropped two dress sizes and gained an awareness of having the entire cosmos located within my own body.”

“Paul mentioned you’d started doing yoga sessions for the staff after work.” *As if his day wasn’t long enough.*

Marg’s arms fell slowly back to her side. “I see those sessions as part of the working day at Paragon, Sarah. I think work should involve a good deal of play, don’t you?”

“Sure, but I work for the public service.”

“I don’t think it’s a question of where you work.”

“Sorry, I was just being…”

“I have come to the belief that work should be a holistic experience.” Marg toggled her hands as though juggling a ball. “Something that is all encompassing, that enriches every facet of an employee’s life.”

“Well, I know Paul enjoys the work-out.”

“Oh, Paul’s quite a natural, Sarah. He has the right physique to be a yogi.”

“What, skinny?”

“Hmm.” Marg breathed slowly in and out; the Celtic knot rose and fell on her flat chest. “I was just texting Paul, actually, to see if he was still here. I was going to offer him a lift back to the conference.”

“You missed him by minutes.”

“Oh.” Marg glanced over Sarah’s shoulder, scanning the empty foyer as if doubting her word. “That’s a relief. I’d hate him to have not left himself enough preparation time. He’s on a panel with two very distinguished experts from Japan.”

“Oh, he didn’t mention that.”

“He didn’t?” Marg raised her eyebrows; muscles tugged like snared threads in her forehead.

“No. He really hasn’t said that much about his talk.”

“His *talk* is one of the key sessions of the conference.”

“Oh.” Sarah grimaced. “I probably wouldn’t have dragged him away for lunch if I’d realised how important his, um, session was.”

“Well, I would have thought that would be...” The dagger-shaped knot lifted sharply; eased more slowly back into its linen sheath. “I suppose taking a break from work includes not talking about work, doesn’t it? We all need breaks from the working day, don’t we?”

Sarah smiled awkwardly, unnerved by the emerald sheen on Marg’s eyes, suspecting it was caused by a combination of colour contacts and irritation. “Hence yoga.”

“Indeed.” The gloss softened a little. “I actually just treated myself to a ten-minute stint up in my suite.”

“So you got in a break as well. That’s good.”

“It was a forced break. One of the delegates suggested a lunch place where the waitresses wear very tight t-shirts, and the idea was almost universally approved. My husband was particularly enthused by the suggestion.” The tiniest tremor moved in Marg’s stiff lower lip. “One of the perils of working in a predominantly male profession, Sarah. Out of town conferences can start to feel like end-of-season football trips.”

“I’m beginning to wonder why I wasn’t left at home.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, it’s just I know nothing about computers and less about computer conferences. I can’t see why Paul brought me along.”

“Well, as I was just saying, workers need sources of play.”

“Oh. Oh, groovy,” Sarah muttered, stung.

“That might have come out wrong,” Marg said after a moment. “I know how much Paul values you. I mean, the fact he wanted you to be here shows you that. He wants you to feel like part of our family.”

“Your...”

“The Paragon family.” Marg spoke quickly, almost defensively.

“Oh, yeah. That’s a term Paul mentions a lot, the Paragon Family.”

“He does?” A strange vulnerability entered Marg’s expression; the bridge of her nose wrinkled between creased sockets, making her momentarily look much younger.

“Sure,” Sarah said more gently. “All the time. I think it’s important to him.”

“And Paul is a very important member of our family.” Marg reached out, hesitated, then quickly grabbed Sarah by the wrist, shaking it as if it were an outstretched hand. “And I want you to feel like part of that family too, Sarah. I do.”

“Thanks, Marg.”

Marg’s grip tightened, probing cartilage. “I want you to feel as much a part of the Paragon family as Paul is.”

“Oh, Marg, I’m touched.” *I preferred the idea of being Paul’s plaything*, Sarah thought. She heard rubber soles squelching behind her.

Bradley was walking across the foyer towards the lift, his face milky in the dull light.

Marg, mercifully, released Sarah’s wrist. “In the spirit of that, why don’t we go back to the conference together?”

“Oh...”

Bradley nodded at Sarah, lifting the rim of an invisible cap from his bushel of black hair.

“Thanks, but I’m not going,” Sarah told Marg.

“You’re not?”

“I’ve tried going to Paul’s talks in the past and it’s never a positive experience for either of us, you know?” Behind her she heard Bradley punch the lift button. “I never get what he’s saying, and then he gets paranoid no-one else has either.”

“I must say I’m a little surprised.” Marg gave the dismissive shrug of a teacher who was disappointed rather than angry.

“Well...” Sarah looked down at her bare legs, feeling as though she was shrinking towards her stubbly kneecaps. Behind her the lift doors binged open. “I’d have to go change.”

“I could wait. If you were quick.”

Sarah spun around towards the closing doors. “Hold the lift, Bradley!”

Bradley stuck his head through the slowly closing gap; the doors halted with an undignified clunk. “Ey?”

“Keep your head right there.”

“So you can admire it some more?”

“So the lift doesn’t move.”

“Sure thing, love.” He propped an elbow on one of the doors, leaning sideways as it reopened. “We wouldn’t want to let the door bang you on the arse, would we?”

Marg was staring at Bradley.

“Bradley and I met earlier today,” Sarah told her. “He’s a gardener.”

“Landscape designer,” she heard Bradley say.

“Glorified gardener.”



“Oi, I heard that!”

Sarah smiled at Marg. “So I can be ready in, what, five minutes? If you sure you don’t mind waiting for me.”

“Fine.” Marg nodded slowly. “Actually, Sarah maybe...maybe I shouldn’t be dragging you along with me.”

“You probably should be. And I’d like to go,” Sarah added hastily.

“But as you said, you probably wouldn’t enjoy it. It’s going to be a long enough afternoon for those of us who do know what the presenters are talking about.”

“I’d like to think I’d catch bit and pieces.”

“Once again I’m probably not expressing myself effectively.” Marg’s smile was impenetrable; her eyes green shields. ‘I just think you’re as deserving as anyone of having some fun in your day.’ Her wooden sandals clacked on the tiles as she walked to the exit. “So let’s leave it at that, shall we?”

Sarah watched her sashay away, buffered by conflicting winds of guilt and relief.

“I’ll see you tonight, Marg? At the Latin party?”

Marg raised her hand without looking back. “Looking forward to it!”

“Me too!” Sarah smiled brightly at Marg’s back until she was in the driveway.

“Would you rather I carried you up the stairs? Because really, I’d love to do that.”

Bradley cocked his head to the side as Sarah turned around. “You right?”

“Something odd just happened to me.”

“Me too. Some random Australian chick took me for a lift lady. What happened to you?”

“My boyfriend’s boss just let me out of doing something I didn’t want to do.”

Bradley crossed his arms. “That’s good news, isn’t it?”

“I guess. I just don’t know why.”

“She obviously likes you.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Of course she likes you. Who wouldn’t like you?”

“Oh.” Sarah shrugged. “Where to start?”

“Let’s start with a coffee. Come on.” He stood upright and the doors closed in on him; he pushed them back with an exaggerated roar. “Come on, get in. I can’t keep up this show of macho strength much longer.”

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The corridor was higher and more luxurious than the one on Sarah’s floor. Magenta runners lined the polished floors; the vases on half-moon tables were stuffed with real orchids. Light pooled in bowl-shaped lanterns. Sea-green portholes lined the wall; beyond them the cityscape looked like a drowned world, the skyscrapers watery like the submerged towers of Atlantis.

They stopped in front of a wide doorway. On a placard the gilt-edge words *Bái Bǎn Suite* were mounted atop an edifice of golden characters.

“I wonder what this means.” Sarah tapped the plaque.

“Hopefully not ‘Honeymoon Suite’.” Bradley tugged on the cord of the lanyard around his neck, pulling up a room card from under his t-shirt. “Seeing I’m sharing with my mum and the Major.”

Sarah watched him swipe the card repeatedly through the clacking slot, his chin poised above the non-responsive light. “Oh, will they be here too?”

“Ah, no. Not at the moment.” The light clicked green. He paused for a moment before reaching for the door handle. “They’re at some big High Tea thing.”

The door opened on a wide space dominated by a red fainting couch as long and thick as a bed. Satin pillows were propped invitingly on the raised end.

“After you.” Bradley waved awkwardly at the space.

“Thanks.”

Bradley stepped in behind her and she shuffled to her left, following the red line of the sofa.

“Right.” He clapped his hands together, making her start. “Coffee.”

She watched him stride purposefully into the kitchenette beyond the sofa, pick up the kettle and lean over the sink.

“Do you want to chuck on the telly?” he called out loudly over the quietly gushing water.

“Not unless you want it on.”

He thumped the jug heavily on its holder. “Tell you the truth, I haven’t worked out how to drive that thing yet.”

Sarah stared at the mammoth plasma screen hanging on the wall by the door; its velvet black surface was framed with silver steel like a piece of experimental art. “Wow, Paul would actually shed tears if he saw this.”

“Paul, your boyfriend.”

“Yeah.”

“He likes big televisions.”

“It’s kind of what he lives for.”

She saw Bradley’s face reflected in the sooty screen, his chin tilted towards her. Turning around she saw him opening the thick steel door of the fridge, disappearing behind it as though

stepping into a vault. Curtains lined the wall behind him, the red drapes muddy with light. “What’s your view like?”

“Ah.” His arm waved in the direction of the curtains. “Just a brick wall behind that, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sure it’s a very elegant brick wall.” She walked around the crimson sofa; snowy carpet tickled her feet.

Bradley shouldered the fridge door shut, dumping a sack of coffee and a carton of milk on the counter between them.

“Wow, you have milk that’s come from a cow?” She stopped to admire.

“Freshly snatched from a calf’s puckered lips.” He squatted down behind the counter, standing up again with a tall glass coffee plunger.

“Talk about the executive lifestyle.” Sarah rested her hands on the edge of the bench. “The coffee in my room’s instant and comes with powdered soy creamer.”

“I’m a bit embarrassed by all this. I don’t really see myself as a suite man.”

“No?”

“No.” He leaned over the glass pot of coffee standing on the bench. “I’m more of a hostel person, you know.”

“Bedbugs and broken glass on the floor.”

“And the couple in the top bunk who are always convinced they’re keeping the noise down.” He scooped heaped spoonfuls of coffee into the plunger, suddenly picking up the bag and thrusting it into her face. “Here, smell. It’s hazelnut.”

“Oh, yum.” She intercepted the bag just before the slit grazed her nose, inhaling the delicious scent. “Yeah, it’s amazing, isn’t it, how often there’ll be a couple in your room who just doesn’t realise...”

“Or care...”

“Oh perhaps who wants to be listened to, on some level. Wants someone else to be involved.”

The spoon clattered into the plunger. “Sorry, slightly wired. Second for today.” He lunged for the kettle, lifting it unboiled off the stove; a few wisps of premature steam escaped.

Sarah watched him slide the rattling mug-tree along the bench to make room for the kettle, the suspended cups clinking into a bowl bereft of fruit. She imagined pushing all the items off the bench. “Let’s inspect your view.”

He jerked his head over his shoulder as he filled the plunger. “It’s that-a-way.”

Sarah pulled on the beaded string, slowly unveiling a bank of ceiling to floor windows. “Oh, wow. Lovely.” She surveyed the landscape of glass and steel and white stone. Patches of pagoda and park were sunk like swamps between the towers of the gleaming citadel. Buildings ringed the mouth of a huge harbour, gleaming like capped teeth. The water was dark as bitumen and busy as a carriageway; container ships were positioned diagonally to each other as if in a series of overtaking lanes marked out with froth. The sky flashed suddenly. “Think I just saw lightning.”

“It storms a lot around here. Something to do with being on the Equator.”

“The spheres rub against each other.”

“Vigorously.” Bradley approached with mugs.

“Gold. Thank-you.” Sarah took the mug from the bottom of the handle, avoiding his fingers. “Yum.”

Bradley stared out of the window. “I used to be shit-scared of thunderstorms when I was a kid.”

“Yeah?”

“One of my biggest phobias. Second only to girls.” He tapped the side of the mug, testing the temperature. “I used to go running into mum’s room whenever one started. Which wasn’t really great for either of us, especially when she’d brought a date home.”

“Oh, dear.”

“She ended up bribing me. She gave me a quid for every thunderstorm I got through without running into her room.”

Light flashed between them.

“Magic, isn’t it?” Bradley exhaled steamy breath. “Even if it does make me want to go running to the nearest bedroom.”

“Oh, me too.” She gripped her mug too hard to distract herself from Bradley’s reddening earlobes. “I mean, I don’t normally mind thunderstorms, but when you’re up this high...”

“You’re not fond of heights?”

“They unnerve me. Being this high, having this kind of perspective...” She watched cars tail each other down the street like ants scuttling from the impending rain. “It feels wrong, somehow. Alienating. Like you can see too much. More than you’re meant to be able to see, or are wired to be able to take in or something.”

“I suppose it’s a reminder of how insubstantial we are, really. How tiny we all are in the scheme of things.” Bradley shuffled towards the table in the corner of the room, keeping his gaze on his feet. “Still, watching a thunderstorm from the comfort of an executive suite makes me feel a little more substantial than usual, I must admit.”

“How luxuriously above it all we are.”

“Indeed. From here we may piss on the world from a great height.” He smiled at her; light shocked his face, sparked electric colour in his eyes. “Oh, I forgot to ask if you take sugar.”

“I do, but I’ll get it. In here?” The kitchenette floor was as polished as the lane of a bowling alley and felt equally conducive to a fall.

“Cupboard above the stove, I think.”

She scuffed over to the cupboard.

“Oh, hang on ...”

A heart-shaped container rolled out of the cupboard into her hands. “Whoops.” The words *Raspberry Love Lotion* were repeated in several other languages on the label of the bottle, the lettering becoming darker and wavier as though sinking in syrup.

“That’s not mine.”

“I think I got the wrong cupboard.” She dropped the container on the counter; it rocked over the edge and fell hard onto the ground. “Oh, sorry!”

Bradley dived beside her legs, grabbing the bottle off the ground; his ears were as red as the syrup which dribbled from its ruptured side.

“I’m so sorry, Bradley.” She watched the lotion ooze over his fingers, spill onto his sneakers.

He dropped the bleeding heart in the sink. “The lotion came with the room. Mum’s room, actually, she got the master bedroom. And of course she couldn’t just bloody leave it in there like a normal person.” He knocked on the tap with the back of his hand, rubbing his palms under the gushing water. “Apparently the stuff glows in the dark or something. She reckoned it was giving her nightmares.”

Sarah looked at the sink, watching diluted love lotion curl around the plughole.

“Do you think you’d ever be in love with someone enough to let them put that stuff on you?” Bradley asked her.

Sarah laughed and shook her head. “Please, God, no.”

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“Top up?” Bradley reached for Sarah’s empty mug.

“I probably shouldn’t.” Sarah looked at the silted half-full plunger on the bench. “And yet I hate to see good coffee go to waste.”

Bradley stood up. “Just think of all the people in the world being forced to drink instant.”

“Like my poor boyfriend.” Sarah looked out at the rippling belly of the sky, the electrified clouds. She suddenly imagined Paul in the middle of the storm, shouting his presentation through a howling gale, his eyes and mouth pooling with rain. She shifted in her chair, wishing it wasn’t so comfortable. A reflection of something white caught her eye in the bottom of the window. Looking around she saw a black and white print lying on a wicker stand. “Can I have a look at this?”

“Please do.”

Sarah rested the blown-up photo on her lap and studied it. A man in an army shirt was standing in front of a high garden wall, his arms folded across his puffed chest, the giant face of a monochromatic sunflower grazing his elbow. White light shone on his overexposed forehead, the rest of his face receding into shadow, his thick neck dissolving into the dark brick.

“That’s our ‘grandad goes forth’ shot. It was taken just before he sailed for Singapore. Back in 1941.” Bradley put the refilled mugs on the table and leaned over her. She was aware of his proximity, their invisible spheres of personal space touching. “Mum got a few copies printed in



case one of the museums or archives out here wanted one. I don't know if she's found any takers yet."

"So this is your granddad?"

"Yeah. Well, it was my granddad."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"He died when I was a teenager, love." He eased himself into his chair. "And I didn't know him that well, to be honest."

"You didn't live near each other?"

"We lived in the same town. It's just him and mum didn't really get on. Whenever we went over he never seemed that pleased to see us. Often as not he'd find some excuse to disappear into the garden until it was time for us to go."

"Maybe that's where you got your interest in gardening from."

"Yeah, maybe." He picked up his coffee. His sleeve was still damp and tinged with lurid lotion. "Maybe I came to see gardening as a socially acceptable way to avoid people."

She studied the blurry hairline, the blown features, the eroded lower jaw of the monochrome man. Finally met his intense stare. "He was a striking-looking man."

"He didn't look like that when I knew him. He was much skinnier. His guts weren't that good, which mum reckoned was because of his time in Changi. He ended up getting bowel cancer, poor bastard."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She looked at the man's shining sad eyes. *He looks like he already knows*, she thought.

"He had his own allotment in Changi."

“What’s an allotment?”

“A lot of city-dwellers in the UK have allotments. Little plots they rent in the neighbouring countryside that they drive out to on the weekends to garden in. Grow slug-infested vegetables to poison their friends with at dinner parties.”

“Why don’t they just grow stuff in their own gardens?”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “We really are from different worlds.”

Sarah thought about it. “I guess you’re pretty spatially-challenged in the UK.”

“I used to think that until I came out to Singapore. Do you know thirty percent of this country’s landmass has been reclaimed from the sea?”

“Gawd.” She reached for her topped-up coffee; the greyscale gaze followed her.

“And there’s virtually no wilderness areas left. Even a lot of the parks in Singapore are designated as ‘interim green’ spaces. When the land’s needed for something else all the trees get dug up and loaded onto trucks to be driven across town.”

Sarah laughed.

“It sounds funny but I can’t help seeing it as a sign of what’s to come. For all of us.” He sipped on his coffee. “Maybe in the future every natural habitat will get relocated when they need to build a new motorway. So that the Lake District ends up somewhere in Essex.”

She thought of the corner of her dad’s garden marked with an iron arbour; the plastic box in its shallow grave, waiting, one day, to be transferred to its shared plot. “Things change, I guess.”

“But surely some things should be *preserved*.” Bradley looked down at the photo.

“Anyway, I like the idea of granddad having his own space to dig up.”

“An *allotment*.”

“Yeah. Well, apparently the camp gardens at Changi were quite an elaborate set-up.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, the POW’s grew all sorts. Kang Kong and limes and sweet potato. I think it’s how they got most of their nutrition. They didn’t get much from the Japanese except rice.”

“I’m surprised the Japanese let them keep a camp garden.”

Bradley shrugged. “Mum said right at the end, when granddad was high on morphine, he used to call out stuff in Japanese.”

“Like what?”

“She didn’t know, it was in Japanese.” He smiled wryly. “I know she wishes she’d thought to write it down and look it up later. I think it just came as such a shock to her at the time, hearing her father babbling away in this other language. It was a shock for me too, to be honest. Although it kind of makes sense, doesn’t it? I mean, there would have had to be some form of communication going on between the guards and the prisoners, wouldn’t there? Some kind of, I don’t know, *understanding*.” He sighed. “One of those many things you wish you could go back and ask him about.”

“It might have been a hard thing to ask about, though.”

“Yes.” He nodded thoughtfully. “One of those subjects everyone seems collectively to have agreed not to mention.”

“Agreed without mentioning it.”

“Exactly.”

She let the silence stretch for a moment. “I think it’s amazing what you’re doing now though. Coming out here to honour your granddad.”

“Oh, it’s not much really, not compared to what other families of POWs are doing.” Bradley shrugged. “A lot of families have been writing books, or raising money to get memorials built. Or lobbying for compensation. Far Eastern POW’s only got compo from the British Government about five years ago, and it was too late for most of them by then.”

“That sucks.”

“But that’s how it’s been for these guys, you know, any recognition they’ve got has come too late. Sometimes I think it’s only now they look so sweet and harmless that the powers that be want to acknowledge them, have parades for them and fly them around places. Put them to good *use*.”

“I think it’s kind of the same in Australia. I mean, when I was younger you’d only ever hear about veterans’ groups when they were kicking off about something. And somewhere along the line something changed. It’s unbelievable how many people go to the Dawn Service and the Parade on Anzac Day.”

“It’s the same in the UK. People turn up by the coach load to wave flags and shed tears over the veterans on Armistice Day. There’s more uninformed mourning going on than when Princess Di died.” Bradley shrugged. “Not that I can talk. I’ve only just starting reading about POW camps in the Far East. I had plenty of chances to ask granddad about his war experiences and I never did, as far as I can remember.”

“He may not have wanted to talk about it with you.”

Bradley shook his head. “Oh, but I thought I knew all about war when I was a kid. Or at least all I needed to know, which is how basically fucked it was. Seeing we were at war with Argentina over some island no one had heard of and Russia and America were in a race to push that big button.”

Sarah nodded. “‘Nobody wins nuclear wars’.”

“Yeah, Mutually Assured Destruction and *When the Wind Blows* and all those god-awful Sting songs.” Bradley rolled his eyes. “And when I got older and went travelling through the Far East and got a chance to see what Western powers had done to this part of the world, it didn’t exactly fill me with burning pride for my heritage, you know? I mean, even now I have to think...” His voice dropped and he leaned forward slightly, as if afraid of being overheard. “I know the POW’s did it tough here, but I think the locals got it a lot worse. The stuff I’ve read about what happened to Singaporean soldiers and civilians during the Japanese Occupation...” He shook his head. “Doesn’t bear thinking about. I just know it makes life at Changi look relatively OK.”

“But I think you can always say that. You can always say someone else had it worse. And rationally speaking it may well be true, but I just don’t think we’re wired to think like that.” Sarah paused. “I mean, rationally speaking my mum’s death wasn’t too bad. She lived into her fifties, she had great medical care...”

“Oh Sarah, I’m sorry to hear you lost your mum.”

“Thanks.” She looked down at her coffee. “But that’s not why I’m bringing it up.” *Although how good the sympathy feels*, she thought, hating herself immediately. “I’m just saying I’m incapable of rationalising it by considering all the people who’ve had it worse. And I know that makes me utterly self centred...”

“Not at all.”

“But it’s true. Mum’s death wasn’t sudden, it wasn’t as a result of terror or violence.” Sarah felt strangely detached from her words. “Some people get gunned down in shopping centres, as one guy at my mum’s funeral pointed out.”

“This is why I work with plants.” Bradley shook his head in disbelief.

“He meant well. I suspect he didn’t know what to say and went with the first thing that came into his head.”

“There probably wasn’t much else kicking around in there.” Bradley balled his fists up inside the sleeves of his dressing gown. “In the spirit of awkward question-asking, um...how did your mum...”

“Oh, cancer. Breast cancer and then cancer everywhere.” Sarah swallowed a large mouthful of bitter coffee.

“Oh, sorry.” He shook his head. “I don’t know what to say. I can’t imagine losing my mum.”

“Neither could I, before it happened. And you know, the funny thing is, I still feel like I can’t imagine it. I don’t entirely *know* that she’s died. It’s too big to know.”

“I’m sorry, lovey.”

“I’m sorry about your grandpa.” Sarah glanced at the man’s puffed chest, avoiding both his and Bradley’s gazes. “His illness must have been really tough.”

“It was much tougher on mum than me. I was away getting stoned at uni when he was dying. And mum, well, I think mum upheld that noble tradition of keeping the worst of it from their kids.”

“They want to protect us.” *And so we imagine the horrors instead*, Sarah thought.

“I must really talk to mum about it one day, though. I must sit her down and ask her about how things were for her when she was losing dad. How she coped. Or didn’t cope.”

*He never will ask, though*, Sarah thought.

“Mum did say granddad spent the last few weeks of his life eating only rice and broth. Which apparently he threw across the room as often as ate. Apparently he used to yell it was like being back in Changi.”

“Oh.”

“Must have been the final straw for the old guy. Having to go back on the diet that probably fucked him up in the first place. I bet he did feel like he was back in prison.” Bradley nodded at the photo. “Look at him there though. He looks so excited, doesn’t he? Likes he’s all ready for his big adventure.”

Sarah heard the note of wistfulness in Bradley’s voice and stared down at the face in which she could only see sorrow, realising she too didn’t know what to say.

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“So Anke and I are at this wedding reception in Germany for one of Anke’s school friends,” Bradley said. “Incredibly hot Amazonian woman, you know, six foot eighteen with these long gorgeous...”

“The reception, Bradley.” Sarah sipped on her third cup of coffee.

“OK, the reception. Well it’s massive, this best-of-everything job in a courtyard of a fifteenth century monastery they’d converted into a function centre. And they’re just clearing away the third course and are about to start the speeches when I feel this pinch on my thigh.”

“Uh-huh.”

“At first I think it’s Anke, because she used to get a bit touchy feely when she was pissed. Well, at least she used to touch me. So I reach out and give her hand a nice lovey-dovey squeeze, and at that moment I feel another pinch. And then I realise there’s something crawling up and down on my leg.”

“Lord.”

“And I kind of slide my chair out, trying to be inconspicuous, which is hard because I’m wearing a top hat, and I look under the table. And I see a whole column of ants crawling across the flagstones and up my trouser leg.”

“Oh no!”

“So I slide down in my seat and start rubbing my leg against the table. But all that seems to do is spur the little bastards onwards and upwards. There’s suddenly about a hundred of them swarming all over my gonads, and I realise this isn’t going to end well. So I lean over and say, ‘Anke, honey, I’ve got to go to the bathroom, I’ve got Germanic ants storming my balls.’ And she thinks it’s hilarious and tries to undo my trousers so she can have a look herself. And I finally manage to fight her off and stand up, my fly at half-mast, and of course all the conversation drops off because everyone thinks I’m going to start the speeches. So I just sort of give everyone the thumbs up and say, ‘*Prosit*, everyone!’ And then bolt for the bogs with my hand on my crotch. And I get to the sink, which is fortunately this nice big porcelain tub, and turn the tap on and very gently flop out the meat and veg. And it all seems to go OK. I manage to wash off a whole lot of ants without any of them biting me. And I’m just having one last comb through, making sure there are no hangers-on, when the door opens and in walks the priest who did the service.”

“Oh, *fuck*.”

“And I just stand there, too horrified to move, my hand on my wet dripping knob. And the priest looks at me, then at the sink, and says ‘*In Germany we use the urinals.*’”

Sarah laughed.

“I drank so much after that I blotted out everything else.” He rolled his eyes at her. “So that’s definitely in my top three of worst travel incidents.”

“God, top *three*?”

““I don’t think it beats the exploding public toilet incident in Marseilles. How about you?”



“Oh.” She thought about it. “Paris was probably the worst place I ever went to.”

“That’s a turn up.”

“I know. I think if I remember it as being so bad it’s because I expected it to be so amazing.” Sarah shook her head. “I did all these things I should have loved. I stayed in this gorgeous guest house in the Latin Quarter and I went to Shakespeare & Co bookshop. I even saw my favourite painting at the Musee d’Orsay, this Van Gogh picture of a church I’d had on my wall as a kid.” *That mum framed*, she thought, thinking of the convex ripples of paper church beneath the glass, the nick in the edge of the cobbled street where her mum’s scissors had slipped. “I stood in front of this picture I’d looked at for years, so close to the canvas I could see the paint splodges, and I just felt really hollow. I guess because there was no-one there to share the moment with. I was there by myself in a room full of couples and families.”

“Probably all wishing they were there by themselves.”

“But I still felt so lonely. I was here in this incredible city and all I wanted was someone to have a pint with.” She nursed her coffee.

“Well, you’ll always have someone to have a pint with now.”

She looked at him blankly.

He arched an eyebrow. “Your bloke.”

“Oh right.” She nodded. “Only Paul’s not really the travelling kind. I have a feeling part of the reason he got me along to Singapore was to help him feel more comfortable in unfamiliar surroundings. That’s my theory, anyway.” She saw Paul standing in their living room, his elbow resting awkwardly on the mantel of their cemented-up fireplace, his finger tracing the edge of the repainted ledge. *I really want you to come, Sarah. It would be great to have you there with me.* She remembered the ledge beside him being clogged with the flowers she’d brought home from the funeral: chrysanthemums blooming in Styrofoam beds and fish bowls of lilies with roots dug into lacquered pebbles; the arrangements were

luminous in her memory although she knew she'd thrown out the wilted remains weeks before. She remembered the look on Paul's face as he stared at the floral spread, the skin puckered thick around his eyes like the eyelets of a leather mask, frowning as if he too knew something was wrong with this picture but couldn't decide what it was. "So if I want to get him as far as Europe I think I'm going to have to find him one hell of a computer conference."

"Did you stay in Europe for long?"

"The usual two-year visa extravaganza. Just long enough to get myself into irreparable debt."

"Nice one."

"Not really. Mine was the original prodigal homecoming. I limped home having squandered my inheritance and slept with many pigs. Dad, bless him forever, had to help me out with the flight."

"And was it good, being back in Adelaide?"

"Yeah, it was." She paused. "Although if I'm honest, I think it took a while to readjust to the place. I remember how struck I was when I first was flying in by how flat and dry everything seemed. How different it was to how I'd remembered it." She saw her first taxiing view of her suddenly unfamiliar hometown, the low conveyer belt of houses beyond the runway sweltering in a gasoline mirage, melting like grey ice-cubes into the flank of straw coloured hills. "But after that things got back to normal, I guess. I got a job I disliked with the intention of paying my dues and setting off again; met Paul, which stalled the travel plans for a bit; and then..." *Normal ended.* She imagined the view again with the pale sky above the camel-hump hills turning ice white; the radiance spreading to eviscerate the houses, the runway, the baggage loaders perched on their caravans of empty carts. "Got further into debt, I suppose."

"But you reckon you might travel again?"

“I’d love to. But, I guess there’s a point where, well, you know. You have to grow up and settle down, get a mortgage...”

“Oh, screw that,” Bradley said with relish. “Find an unscrupulous lender and get on the hoof again.”

She grinned at him. “Get behind me, Bradley.”

His eyes widened. “Ooh, missus.”

“Shut up.” She shook her head. “Did you and Anke travel a lot together?”

“We got away when we could. Yeah, we travelled a bit.”

“And was that mainly a positive experience?”

He laughed. “What do you mean by that?”

She shrugged, uncertain herself. “Well, did you find the act of travelling generally made you closer as a couple?”

“Oh.” He exhaled slowly; breath whistled through gappy front teeth. “To be honest, I think our holidays were kind of barometers for our relationship in general. I remember the earlier ones as mostly marvellous and the later ones as voyages of the damned.” He grinned ruefully. “Actually, it’s a bit like a movie cliché, really. Our first holidays were camping trips around England fuelled on soup and love, and they were blissful. And the bliss and love seemed to go downhill in direct proportion to the food and accommodation getting better.”

“I’m sorry, Bradley.”

“I try to be philosophical about it. I don’t think I’ll ever get suckered into buying a big expensive package holiday in the belief it’ll make me happier. I think a coach-trip to the beach can be the trip of a lifetime if you’re with the right person. And the Greek Isles can be like the nine circles of hell if you’re falling out of love with someone.” He shrugged. “I reckon the big mistake people make is thinking that going away somewhere will make them different, somehow. When I

reckon all it does it emphasise who you actually are, and how you work as a couple, or don't work. Everything comes to a head when you can't get away from each other."

"I guess you just have to find different ways to create space." She thought of her and Paul's post-coital positioning the night before: Paul prostrate on a hump of pillows, watching a recap of the football game; her lying on her side reading and rereading a blurring page of Virginia Woolf. The six-inch demarcation zone of duvet between them as effective a divide as a wall.

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"Yesterday we visited the main Commonwealth War Cemetery in Singapore. A place called Kranji." Bradley emptied plunger sludge into his cup. "Did you know there's an office in London responsible for the maintenance of all the Commonwealth War Graves in the world?"

"No, I did not," Sarah replied.

"This one place decrees what height all the graves will be and what kind of grass will get grown between the plots and everything. And the planners try to ensure every graveyard looks alike as possible. I don't know if it's meant to make visitors feel like they're visiting a little corner of England, but I reckon it gives the place a really surreal feel. Like it's been, I don't know, just superimposed of the landscape." He licked his lips; his gums were grimy with coffee. "I got the impression the tour guide wasn't that keen on Kranji either. She took us around this big shrine where all the soldiers whose bodies had never been found had their names inscribed. About fifty thousand names there were, all written last name first like they were listings in some giant telephone directory. And the guide said some people believed those soldiers had hungry ghosts, that because their bodies never received proper funeral rites their souls were destined to forever roam the earth."

"She said they'd have *hungry* ghosts?"

“Yeah. I wanted to talk to her more about what she meant by that but we were on one of those whistle-stop tour things. And this other guy was hogging her attention, this military enthusiast who couldn’t get enough of Kranji. He had a tick list drawn up of the graves of soldiers who’d met particularly brutal deaths.”

“Ye Gods.”

“Yes, he’s what I’d call a Hungry Ghoul. Apparently he was off to take part in some re-enactment of the South Pacific campaign. Apparently he was going to be jumping out of a plane over Guam with a retired army colonel.” He shook his head. “If there are any hungry ghosts hanging around Guam I hope they take a bite out of both of them.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I don’t think so. I don’t mind the idea of them, if only because I like the thought of those missing soldiers leaving something behind: not just being a name on a wall. But I think I believe more in regeneration.”

“As in...”

“As in, well, decomposition being necessary for the cycle of life to continue. Dead organisms break down so the living can flourish. As we rot in the ground...” He put his hand over his mouth. “Sorry, love, I’ll stop.”

“No, don’t. I see what you’re saying. And it’s a nice philosophy.” She thought of the tub in the soil, the impermeable grey plastic. “Although I think I prefer the idea of ghosts.”

“Ghosts aren’t alive, though, are they?”

“No, but they’re *intact*.” She paused. “I don’t know. I’m probably the wrong person to talk to about this. I’m not exactly nature-attuned. Pot plants take one look at me and wilt to save time.”

“Ah, it’s people like you that keep me in business.”

“My dad’s quite a keen gardener. He’s got a few projects on the go at the moment, with spring coming. I guess he’s more embracing of the cycle of life thing.” She thought of the black rack secured to the back fence of the garden and the attempts her father was making to graft life to it: the grey sticks of wisteria he’d lashed to its sides, the clumps of fledgling dahlias he’d scattered at its iron feet, the clods of disturbed earth where he’d sunk a minefield of bulbs in the hope they’d detonate lilies. The single dying rosebush the funeral home had sent with the bill. The grey tub of ashes buried deep in the lightless earth.

“Does he get you involved, love?” Bradley asked.

“No, I must admit I’m more of a looker-on.”

She suddenly felt the weight of the tub in her empty arms, remembered holding it awkwardly as she’d watched her dad dig a hole for it, crouched on all fours with a trowel, digging quickly, almost frantically, throwing the soil away from his hunched frame as though it was crawling with bugs. She remembered staring down through the plastic lid at the pale grey heap of ashes, the lopsided incline of soot covered with a fine top layer of slate. She remembered the strange sense of calm that had engulfed her like a cone of silence, wrapped itself around her and all that was left of her mother: a tub that she’d cradled as she watched her father tear into the dark earth.

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“I think the storm’s passed.” Sarah gazed through the window. Light shone on the clear horizon of the harbour; the container ships were wreathed in gold.

“Hopefully mum’s indoors for her High Tea.” Bradley glanced at the folded umbrella on the bench. “She forgot her brolly.”

Sarah smiled at him.

“What?”

“You care about her.”

“I care about her getting wet and blaming me for it.”

She leaned over and patted his hand. “Your secret is safe with me, Bradley.”

He watched her fingers slide back across the table. “You know what’s really pathetic? It was my idea to tag along to Singapore with mum. When she said she was going to be accompanying the Major I could see all kinds of disasters taking place. Mum’s the kind of person who will ignore any and all of her own ailments if she’s looking after someone else. It’s like a badge of honour with her. I could picture her blind and bleeding from the eyes and still groping around the room searching for Tom’s medications.”

Sarah saw her own mother hauling a chair across the church tea-room, bent low against the stiff wooden back with her headscarf slipping precariously forward. *Was that really how it was?* she wondered. “You obviously turned out like your mum, Bradley.”

“No, not at all love. Not at all. You ask her how often we got together when I was with Anke.” He grinned ruefully. “I guess as you get older you just start to stress out about your folks in the same way they always have done about you. It’s like Confucius says, isn’t it? The joy of having your parents still alive is tempered by the worry their ageing brings you.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. “See, now I am impressed.”

“Oh, I read that in an in-flight magazine. It was in an ad for a funeral home or something.”

“And honest too. You could have told me you’d been reading the *Confucian Analects* and I would have believed you.”

“I guess that’s the beauty of travel, isn’t it? You get to represent yourself anyway you like.” He hugged himself sheepishly, massaging fleshy biceps. “I’m sort of misrepresenting myself at the moment. I mean, I’m making myself out as being on this tour of duty, doing this big act of filial devotion, and...”

“And?”

Their eyes met; glanced off each other.

He looked out of the window. “And yet I’m just having the best afternoon, aren’t I?”

The door banged open.

“Arse.” Bradley’s head snapped around. “Was that necessary, mum?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Carol took in Bradley, then Sarah. “I didn’t realise I’d be intruding on something.”

“You’re not,” Sarah said quickly.

“You just opened the door pretty hard,” Bradley said almost simultaneously.

“Well, it’s a heavy door Bradley.” Carol hip-and-shouldered the door further open.

“Requires some force.”

The Major materialised in the dim corridor. “Carol, I should be holding the door for you.”

“It’s not a drama, Major.” She spoke gently but jerked her head impatiently. “Come on.”

“Well, if you insist.” The Major drew himself upright as he crossed the threshold; he took in Sarah and Bradley with a strangely imperious gaze. “Don’t the pair of you make a lovely picture by the window.”

“And here we were worrying about Bradley being lonely this afternoon.” Carol released the door with a bang that made Sarah flinch. She stood up.



Bradley rose with his hands stuffed in his pockets. “You’re back early, aren’t you?”

“Carol was feeling a little tired,” the Major said.

“I had the impression we were both fading a bit, Major.” Carol’s tone was cheerful but her face looked strangely wounded: her skin deathly pale, her cheeks blotched as though scraped along carpet. “I hope I didn’t drag you away.”

“Not at all.” He held up open palms in a pacifying gesture.

Carol limped into the kitchenette; swollen feet rose above her snug shoes like sponges in cake tins. “What happened here?” She stared at the sink.

“Your sodding raspberry lotion fell out of the cupboard, didn’t it?” Bradley said.

“It’s not *my* sodding lotion.” Carol grabbed a scourer.

“Leave it mum. I’ll have another go later.”

“That’ll be the day, when you clean up after yourself.” The air rasped with scouring.

“Sarah, I was thinking of you earlier.” The Major crossed the carpet carefully as though covering unstable ground. “I was having a debate with a local historian about the character of Gordon Bennett.”

“There were historians everywhere.” Carol’s sharp vowels pinged off the splashboard.

“Never seen such a scruffy bunch in my life. And they fairly inhaled the High Tea. It was like they hadn’t eaten in a month.”

“Well, I imagine there’s not a great deal of money in history.” The Major smiled genially.

“You wonder why they’re so hell-bent on digging it up, then.” Carol tossed the scourer into the wall of the sink and wiped her brow; she sighed. After a moment her back straightened. “Now.” She tucked a strand of wilted hair behind her ear. “That’s done.” She turned around slowly. “Shall we all have a coffee? Sarah?” She smiled tightly at Sarah. “A coffee?”

“Ah, no thanks.” Sarah smiled back at Carol, trying to warm her expression, thaw her frosty eyes. “If I drink anymore coffee I’ll be airborne.”

“Yeah, ditto.” Bradley nodded.

Carol picked up the discarded bag of coffee on the bench; pinched slowly down its sliver flank. “You have got through a fair bit, haven’t you?”

“I can go downstairs and get some more.” Bradley looked aslant at Sarah.

She nodded. “I can go with you.”

“Might have to settle for tea, Major.” Carol dropped the bag and reached for the kettle.

“Fine. Now, Sarah.” The Major peered up at Sarah; the afternoon light caught the streaks on his glasses, putting his eyes behind iridescent bars. “Gordon Bennet was the commander of the Australian Eighth...”

“You take milk, don’t you, Major?”

“Ah...” The Major stared confusedly at Carol.

“And one sweetener.” The overfull kettle landed heavily on its holder. “And I think we’ll have a couple of those biscuits we got in Little India. Seeing the historians deprived us of most of the sweets.”

“Weren’t those biscuits a present for your sister?” Bradley asked.

“Well, they’re a bit of a rubbish present.” Carol yanked open the cupboard and balanced on twitching tiptoe, reaching the tin on the top shelf. “As I remember you saying.”

“You know, I should...” Sarah began to say.

Bradley touched her shoulder lightly. “So, the historians were fairly thick on the ground, Major?”

“Yes.” The Major coughed; phlegm crackled in his windpipe. “The High Tea was being thrown by the British High Commissioner, you see. And as a result there were all sorts of notable people there, lots of government ministers and visiting dignitaries.”

“Valued guests,” Carol said quietly.

“There was quite an impressive line-up of speakers,” the Major continued, “although we only ended up staying to hear the first address.”

“We could have stayed longer, Major.” Carol’s voice was barely audible above the kettle; steamed away by the spout.

“Well, I imagine we’re both quite spoken out.” The Major’s mouth flapped reflectively. “It was a good address though, the one we heard.”

“Did it beat that talk we heard last night about the transvestites of Bugis Street?” Bradley winked at Sarah. “This area of Singapore called Bugis Street used to be famous for its female impersonators. Before the war it was very popular with British Officers.”

Carol set down the tin with a clank and glared at Bradley. “I’m so pleased that’s the one thing you’ve got out of this weekend.”

*Don’t take your bad mood out on him,* Sarah thought in sudden irritation. She watched Carol scratch the taped edge of the navy tin with an orange talon. *No-one asked you to stay in the kitchen and serve.*

“Well, no. It didn’t quite beat that...” The Major stared at Sarah; his eyes sharpened with a lustiness that startled her. “But it was still very good. The woman giving the talk was a doctor who was also the daughter of a POW. One of the camp surgeons, actually, who’d unfortunately died while he was interned. And his daughter had gone on to study the conditions her father would have treated. Made herself something of an expert in the field, apparently. She had a PowerPoint

presentation, I think she called it. Lots of slides of ringworms and tropical ulcers and other ailments...”

“They beamed the pictures up on the wall.” Carol clawed the tape.

“Apparently the best way to get out tropical ulcers is with a heated spoon,” the Major mused.

The biscuit tin clattered onto the bench. “Oh, the way they wrap these things!” Carol yanked a drawer open.

Bradley began to walk towards the kitchen; stopped as Carol pulled out a breadknife.

“A good part of the talk was actually quite amusing,” the Major continued. “Some of the stories about the medical advice the doctors used to give, for example. One doctor was apparently informed by a visiting local that hibiscus leaves were particularly good for staving off infertility. He mentioned it to one of his patients in passing. And the next day he woke to find every hibiscus plant in the camp had been deforested.”

Bradley chuckled.

The Major’s eyes gleamed back at him. “I remember we used to go to the doctors with all kinds of things we were hoping to eat. Bugs and worms and snails...later on we started trying leaves and grass...”

Carol dropped the tin onto the counter; picked it up and threw it down again harder.

“Mum,” Bradley said tentatively.

“It won’t open, I’m afraid.” She stared down at the tin with fiery eyes.

Bradley began to walk towards her; the Major overtook him. “Let me, my dear. Opening tins is man’s work.”

“Here we are surrounded by cake and biscuits and...” Carol tugged on a hank of hair.

“And we’re struggling to gain access to any of them.” He slid the biscuit tin into his arms, cradling it as carefully as a cat. “I know exactly what you mean. But these things are sent to try us.”

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Bradley followed her out into the corridor; he shut the door softly behind them as though they were leaving the room of a sleeping child.

“I’m sorry.” Sarah spoke softly; the air-conditioned crosswind blew the apology back in her face.

“For what?”

“I feel like I was intruding on something.”

“No, not at all love. No, that was nothing.” Bradley’s tone was jocular but hushed and he glanced over his shoulder as he spoke. “You should see what happens when she can’t get into the gin.”

“It must have been really upsetting for Carol, hearing that talk about the POW’s.”

“That’s the trouble with POW research in general.” A bitter note entered his voice. “Most of the stuff that gets unearthed tends not to be particularly cheerful, you know? And if you’re like mum and hell-bent on learning every gory detail...”

“I guess she wants to know what her dad went through.”

“She needs to learn to handle it better,” he snapped. “Oh, sorry.”

“That’s fine.”

“It’s not.” He shook his head. “It’s me being a selfish git.”

“No, it’s not.”

He soccered an invisible object off the carpet. “I can’t stand the way it makes her.”

“You don’t like seeing your mum in pain.”

He raised his foot, lining up another shot. “Does anyone?”

“No.”

He wobbled as he took his eyes off the ball to look at her. “Why don’t you come back inside?” he asked after a moment. “We could attack those biscuits.”

“Oh, no. I mean, I just said my goodbyes.”

“But mum will already be feeling better. Trust me, her moods don’t last long.”

*Or she buries them quickly*, Sarah thought. “I kind of have to go.” She checked her watch, grimacing at the hands’ recriminating angle. “I have to go shopping. I need to be dressed like a Mexican hooker by six tonight.”

Bradley’s head snapped in a double-take.

“It’s a work thing.”

“You might have to explain that to me next time we speak.”

“Will do.” She inhaled icy air; exhaled warmer breath. “Um...shall we speak again?”

“I was wondering that.” His sneakers rasped kinetically on the carpet. “We’re kind of based on opposite sides of the world, aren’t we?”

“I tried to dig a hole to England once.”

“Oh, how did that go?”

“I got a few feet in and hit worms. Half-worms actually, which was worse.” She shrugged. “Dad later consoled me by pointing out I would have ended up in the Mediterranean if I’d kept going.”

“Bugger. For a moment I thought we were on to something.”

Sarah smiled.

“Well, here’s my card.” He dug into his pocket, pulling out a metal card wallet. “People don’t say goodbye anymore, do they? They just say ‘Here’s my card.’” He slid a green business card out of the holder and handed it to her. “So here’s my card.”

*I’m really not going to see him again*, she thought, taking the card and reading the line of yellow italics running along the top. “*Plants bind your souls.*”

“Anke came up with that.” Paul grimaced. “I think it sounds less brutal in German.”

“It’s kind of romantic-sounding, I think.”

“Oh, that’s Anke. Romantic all over.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m surprised she didn’t ask for fifty percent of the words back when she divorced me.” He bit the corner of his lip. “Pathetic, aren’t I?”

“No.”

“My next batch of cards will carry a slogan like *‘My tears will be good for your garden.’*”

“You always need time to get over someone.”

“It’s probably true what they say. You don’t really get over someone until you meet someone...Ah.” He shoed her gently. “You must go. Go get dressed like a Mexican hooker.”

*Don’t ask him to come along*. Sarah slipped the card into her pocket. “Why don’t you come along?”

“Huh?” He stopped dead in the middle of a fidgeting shuffle.

“To the shops. You could come along. Or...”

He nodded quickly. “No, that could work.”

“We could do a quick shop and then a drink?”

“Yeah.” His head jerked like a nodding dog on a dashboard. “Great. Oh, I’d like that.”

“Me too.”

“Well, cool. Cool.” His eyes widened, threatening to burst the banks of their sockets; aquamarine colour flooded Sarah’s gaze.

*Oh Christ*, she thought, gripping the card.

“Right. Right. I’ll just go tell the old dears.” He spun around and went to swipe the slot with his card; he paused.

“You right?” Sarah asked after a second.

He nodded slowly. “Just, ah, working out my phrasing.”

“Your...”

“Well, you know. How to explain to mum that...” He checked himself. “Not that I need to explain anything to her. At all.”

The butterflies ricocheting off Sarah’s ribcage began to settle. “She’d be hoping you’d spend some more time with her, I guess.”

“She’d never say as much.”

She watched his shoulders slump. “Which is why you should stay, I think.”



“It’s just...” He combed his fingers through his hair as he turned around; the gesture made her think of Paul. “It’s the main event tomorrow morning. This big dawn service for the end of the war. It’s the reason why we’re out here, really. And I don’t know if she was hoping I might help her and the Major get some stuff ready this evening. She had sort of, well, hinted at it.”

“You’ve come this far, Bradley. It would be a shame to drop the ball now.”

“I’d be quite happy to drop the ball.” He paused. “Look, I think they’ll both be in bed by seven or so. Why don’t we meet late?”

The butterflies did a fleeting loop and settled again. “This evening I will be performing my duties as a corporate girlfriend. Hence the Mexican hooker thing.”

“Right.”

“That’s really why I’m here, you see.”

“To be a Mexican hooker.”

“Exactly.” Her unreciprocated giggle went on for a second too long.

“So duty calls for both of us,” Bradley said when she’d quietened down.

“Yes. Yes it does.” She nodded.

“And how good we are to both answer the call.”

“Outstanding.” The word sounded as hollow as she suddenly felt.

“Well done thou good and faithful girlfriend.”

“And well done th...” Her breath caught as he kissed her hard in the corner of her mouth. Chapped lips dug into her cheek; a skerrick of breath slipped from his mouth into hers. “Good and faithful son,” she murmured.

“Alright, love, on your bike.” He turned and swiped the door a little too abruptly; the card cracked like clapped hands in her face.

She took soft-kneed steps down the corridor, propelled lift-wards by the relentless current. “I’ll email you, Bradley.”

“I’ll look out for it, Sarah.”

She stopped, hooked by the catch in his throat.

He had already vanished.

She stared at the large dark door. She breathed in and out. *Don’t be an idiot.*

She walked to the lifts and punched the single illuminated button, making the unavoidable choice of going down.

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The directions the receptionist had given her for a nearby mall led Sarah into a narrow street clogged with traffic. Cars snarled around a tour bus shuddering like a sleeping beast. A group of construction workers was seated in the back of a throbbing ute, a raft of men afloat on a sea of shimmering metal, their orange vests tied like lifejackets around their thin chests. As the traffic growled forward one of the men dangled a dark arm over the side of the tray; cupped his hand as though skimming it over water.

The street was lined with double storey shops that looked like they had once been houses; signs for real estate offices and graphic design studios hung between shuttered windows with balcony boxes, protruded from narrow doorways set in wide front porches. Steam was rising out of an electric cauldron in the portico of one of the larger shops; the sulphurous odour made Sarah

switch to mouth-breathing as she approached the bubbling bowl. Large grey balls were bobbing against each other like bald bathers in a hot spring.

A woman in a white uniform walked out onto the porch with a plastic bag and a slotted spoon.

Sarah watched her fish a steaming ball out of the cauldron. “Excuse me, what are they?”

“Tea Egg,” the sales assistant replied sternly, shaking the egg down into the bag.

“Oh, they’re eggs?”

The assistant frowned at her.

“They taste better than they smell,” another voice said.

A thin woman in a baggy silk blouse and trousers was standing in the doorway; her hand was pressed against the dark frame as though steadying herself. Her face was the colour of the beige mist rolling across the door; kohl eyebrows were traced on hairless sockets. Black hair hung thick and synthetically glossy around her sunken cheeks. “Trust me, they’re delicious.”

Sarah opened her mouth and closed it again.

“Oh, I just want one.” The woman held out her hand as the sales assistant spooned a second egg into the bag.

“I only charge you for one.”

“It’s not that.” The thin woman rested her hand on the clerk’s shoulder. Sarah saw the black bruise on her wrist where a vein had been recently tapped. “My husband won’t stay in the same room as me if I eat more than one egg.”

“Get him to eat one too.” The clerk put her fleshy arm across the thin woman’s back.

“Then you both have bad breath.”

Sarah stood still for a moment before following the women into the store. The wide aisles were furnished with an array of indeterminable luxury items: wooden boxes trimmed with red satin ribbons, golden bars stacked like ingots, ivory jars sealed with silver lids. The woman in the wig was bent over a row of jade green bottles, her lips pursed as if preparing to blow her first note.

“Can I help you?”

Sarah turned sharply.

A younger assistant was smiling prettily at her; her lips were brightly painted contours in an otherwise streamlined face. Black hair was swept back in a mercilessly tight bun. “Are you looking for something in particular?”

“No, just browsing.”

“Browsing for something in particular?”

Sarah glanced at the items in a nearby glass cabinet, failing to find illumination in the collection of china snuff bottles and granite mortar and pestles on display. “Is this a gift shop?”

The girl’s smile widened without a single crease forming in her taut cheeks. “We are a traditional medicine centre.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise.” A cardboard cut-out of a skeletal woman in a red dress reclined in the corner of the store, a sash labelled ‘*Pearl Slimming Powder*’ draped across her emaciated frame. “You seem very modern.”

“We are. Our doctors only use the latest technologies.”

“You’re a clinic as well?”

“We could probably fit you in for an appointment, if you like.”

“Oh, that’s alright,” Sarah said quickly. “I’m actually in OK health at the moment.” *At least compared to some*, she thought, glancing back at the woman in the wig.

She was holding a red jar close to her face, turning it as if to catch her reflection in the glass. Her sleeve had slipped down her emaciated arm, exposing the dagger-shaped bruise; the cross that would mark the spot for the next round of treatment.

“Although I do have this slight pain in my gut,” Sarah said.

“I’ll check to see if a doctor is free.” The girl walked towards the closed door at the back of the store. Beside the door a huge rack of teak drawers stretched all the way to the high ceiling. The boxes were labelled with yellow cards in brass holders and reminded Sarah of the book catalogues stored in the basement of her library. A man in a grey lab coat was standing on a ladder halfway up the rack, scooping bits of black bark out of an open drawer. A long glazed counter ran along the front of the boxes, with dried products displayed on pewter dishes: powdery heaps of olive dust, twisted fragments of yellow petal, long pieces of gnarled grey root. The woman in the wig walked up to the counter and peered through the glass, studying the withered cornucopia. Beside her a man was leaning over the counter with his nose wrinkled in seeming distaste.

*It couldn’t be worse than the stuff they had mum on,* Sarah thought. Seeing the plastic vials in the jug by her mother’s bed, the tubes fat and blunt as textas, the flat tips so easily fed into the catheter a child could have done it: red for morphine and blue for another drug she hadn’t been able to remember the name of but which also started with an m. *It won’t matter if you mix them up, anyway,* she remembered the nurse telling her. *They’ll both have the same result.*

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Sarah sat on the edge of her plastic chair, staring across the waiting room of the clinic. It was strangely reminiscent of her doctor’s surgery in Adelaide; a glossy print of a misty mountain-range was mounted on the beige wall, phones blipped behind a high black counter plastered with posters advising check-ups. A woman in a bleach-white tunic was leaning across the counter, speaking in

another language to a grey-haired man propped on a cane. A middle aged couple were sitting side by side beneath a clock with a jerky second-hand; the red arm flicked upwards after each downward stroke as if wishing to have the moment again. The woman was sitting still, her trousered legs pressed together at the knees and ankles. The man was jiggling his heels up and down on the slate floor, humming a tune that seemed to consist of a single note. The woman glanced up at him, asking him something, her voice a rumble beneath the clack of the clock. He murmured something in reply without looking at her; a moment later he reached over and squeezed her hand, finding her fingers without looking for them.

The electronic board hanging behind the desk beeped and a light flashed beside the words *Room 4*. The receptionist waved the grey-haired man into silence and looked at her clipboard. “OK, Sarah?”

“Hi.” Sarah stood up.

“Room four, please.” The woman gestured down the corridor. “Last door on the left.”

“Right. OK.” Sarah hesitated, suddenly wanting to ask what to expect; the man propped on the cane began speaking again and the receptionist turned back to him.

“Thanks.” Sarah walked down the dim passageway. She paused for a moment in front of the last door on the left, glancing back at the brightly lit reception area that suddenly appeared to be a long way away.

When she knocked she heard a voice say, “Come in!”

A man in a white coat glanced up from his desk as Sarah walked in, gazing at her with the distracted look of someone who had been interrupted in the middle of doing something important. He nodded at the green vinyl chair facing his. “Please have a seat,” he told it.

Sarah sat down in the chair, glancing at the anatomical model on the doctor’s desk: a skinned red face with a pair of lidless blue eyes.

“OK, Sarah...” The doctor studied the card Sarah had filled in; his wire-rimmed glasses slid down his thick nose. “You have a sore stomach?”

“I sometimes get stomach pains. I’m fine at the moment, though.”

He leaned forward and felt the sides of her neck. “How long has it been sore?” He reached for his wrist.

“Oh, I don’t know. A while. But it comes and goes.”

The doctor stared into her eyes for a moment, then nodded and opened a drawer. Sarah was surprised to see him pull out a stethoscope. “Do you mind if I have a listen?” He pushed the tubes of the stethoscope into his ears.

“No.”

“If you could just lift up your t-shirt a bit...that’s fine.”

Sarah sucked in her gut self-consciously as the doctor leaned forward, placing the cold disc on her skin.

“Mm.” The doctor frowned and listened, moving the disc to another point on her stomach. “Quite a bit of gas.”

“Oh, that’s a relief. I thought it was just flab.” Sarah took in the room: the stainless steel sink, the tall white cabinet, the box of rubber gloves. Her stomach gave a gurgle.

He sat up again. “Maybe you are stressed about something?” He dropped the stethoscope back in the drawer. “Something is making you anxious?”

*Apart from this room?* “I’m kind of an anxious person by nature. But I’m on a, well, a kind of holiday, so I was hoping I’d be more relaxed than normal.”

“You live in...Australia?” He checked her card. “So you’re travelling at the moment?”

“I’m just here for the weekend.”

“Travel can be stressful.”

“It is when you bring your boyfriend with you.”

The doctor smiled as he scribbled a note on her card.

“And I have to go to this important party tonight and do all this mingling, which I suck at. So that might be a source of some trepidation.”

“My wife goes to parties without me. I stay home with the cat.” He jotted something else down. “So your boyfriend and a party, they are causing you stress.”

“Yeah.” She nodded slowly, thinking again of the woman in the store: her blurry kohl eyebrows, her arms yellow and thin like limbs dug out of clay. “I, um, and my mum died fairly recently.” Again she experienced the strange feeling of being distanced from her words.

“That’s a big thing.” The doctor stopped writing and looked at her.

“Yeah, but that happened, oh, nearly two months ago, now.” She bit her lip, guiltily aware of not recalling the exact date or day; only, roughly, the hour. “Late July.” *At dawn.* She remembered, just after, the early morning sun slicing through the crack in the curtains, bisecting the dim room, the ashen bed.

“And now that it’s September, you think you should be recovered from it?”

“No, no, but...I didn’t think it would be a source of stress anymore.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, well...It’s something that’s already *happened.*”

He looked evenly at her. “Was your mother’s death sudden?”

“Yes. I mean, no. Mum had cancer for about, what, eighteen months. But she fought it so hard, I guess we all thought she’d...I dunno.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what we thought.”

“Was she in a lot of pain at the end?”



“Oh...yeah. But they gave her stuff to help...” Her words echoed around her as though she was speaking from the bottom of a well.

“Watching someone you love suffer can make you feel sick too.”

“Mum’s not suffering anymore,” Sarah told him.

The doctor was silent for a moment. “And you want your stomach to stop hurting too.”

“If possible.” She nodded. “I promised my boyfriend I’d be on good form tonight.”

The doctor wrote something else on his card. “OK, I think we’ll try a bit of acupuncture.”

“Acupuncture? Like with needles?”

“You’ve had acupuncture before?”

Sarah swallowed on a suddenly dry throat. “No, I haven’t. I’ve just heard there are lots of needles involved.”

“I will be using about five very small needles. I just need to make sure I put them in the right places.”

“What happens if you put them in the wrong places?”

“I need to take you to another kind of doctor.”

“Right.” Sarah forced out a giggle.

The doctor stood up and gestured to the bed at the side of the room. “If you just want to lie down over here.”

Sarah stared at the bed in the corner of the room, half-hidden behind a partly drawn curtain. A long halogen bar was glaring above the bed, casting a sickly sheen across its swamp green surface. It reminded her of a programme she’d seen about Stasi torture chambers. “Small needles, you say.”

“Very small needles.” The doctor walked over to the cabinet. “You will hardly feel them if you relax.” He pulled one of the cabinet drawers open.

Sarah walked slowly across the room; her legs felt as though they’d both just been taken out of plaster casts.

She heard a rattling noise, like the sound of multiple forks tapping glasses at a wedding. The doctor appeared from behind the curtain, pushing a white plastic cart with a tray of test tubes on it; a jiggling plastic strip stuck out of each one. He lifted one of the plastic strips out of its holder, revealing a long silver needle.

*Oh you’re fucking joking.* Sarah stared at the needle.

“You see?” the doctor asked. “Very small.”

“Compared to what?” Sarah muttered thickly.

“If you just want to lie down...”

She lay down on the cold vinyl mattress and stared up at the ceiling. The grey grid of ceiling tiles blurred before her eyes.

“If you could just uncross your arms...and lift your t-shirt up a bit...”

“Yep.” Sarah gritted her teeth.

“OK, that’s good.”

She felt the doctor placing his hand lightly on her stomach, heard the clink of a needle knocking against its vial. Then a jab in her abdomen. “Ah.”

“Just relax.” The doctor slid another needle into the left side of her stomach and she held her breath.

“OK?” The man slid a third needle into the right side of her stomach, the tip digging into the knot of cramped muscles above her pelvis. “Remember to breath.”

“OK.” Sarah felt the hand lifting off her abdomen and exhaled slowly, stopping as the pain tore across her gut. “Ow.”

“Do you feel OK?” The man stuck a needle under her kneecap.

“Am I meant to?”

“Last one.” The man jabbed a needle under her other kneecap.

“It really...ow. Hurts.”

“You just need to relax, OK?” The doctor patted her shoulder and then walked to the end of the bed. Sarah, craning her neck, saw him switch on something that looked like a tall white lamp. Glancing down she saw the three needles sticking out of her stomach, trembling windswept flags on a snowy mountain of flesh.

She looked quickly back up at the ceiling.

The doctor wheeled the lamp back along the side of the bed, tilting it over Sarah’s stomach. “OK, these just stay in a few minutes.”

*Oh God, Sarah thought, a few minutes.*

“I’ll be here if you need anything.” He walked back around the curtain, pulling it behind him. She heard the scrape of a computer keyboard being pulled across a desk, and, after a moment, the slow patter of unconfident typing; over-struck keys clacked like the first stones of a hailstorm on a roof.

Sarah closed her eyes, watching the outlines of the ceiling tiles burn in blazing squares across her retinas. Heat seared her exposed flesh. She took another aching breath and opened her eyes.

“You’re OK in there?” the doctor called from behind the curtain.

“Sort of.”

“Just try and relax.”

She clenched and unclenched her fists. “I thought acupuncture wasn’t supposed to hurt.”

“It doesn’t when you relax. It’s supposed to relieve pain.”

“Ah.”

“We use it for pain control.”

“Oh.” She remembered a district nurse asking Sarah’s mum if she might want to try marijuana. The pins seemed to twist as though drawn towards a magnetic force in the lamp. “Do you treat cancer patients?”

The typing stopped. “Sometimes, yes.”

“That’s a big thing for um, cancer sufferers, isn’t it. Managing pain.” Sarah breathed quickly in and out, trying not stretch her pinned stomach. “My mum used to do a lot of meditation. She’d go out to her favourite spot in the garden for an hour each day.”

“Meditation is excellent for pain control. It makes everything in your body slow down. Relax.”

“Mum used to fall asleep.”

She heard the smile in his voice. “Good. That means she was very relaxed.”

“Tired too, I think. Especially...near the end.” She saw, dimly, her mother asleep under the Robinia tree in the back yard, a low bough fanned over her hunched form, her book of meditations splayed open across her lap. “The treatment took a lot out of her.”

“But she kept up with the meditation.”

“Yeah. Yeah, she did. She kept on going out to the garden and we kept on going out there an hour later to wake her up.” The memory of her mother beneath the tree became more distant, and more dramatic: the leaves of the Robinia turned lurid green beneath a suddenly darkening sky; her mother’s frail form appeared as that of a child sheltering from an impending storm. “Please, these are really hurting.”

She heard the squeak of a chair, followed by hasty footsteps, and the doctor appeared around the curtain. “OK. We’ll take them out.”

“Sorry.”

“Just relax.”

“OK.” She inhaled tentatively as he pulled pins. To her surprise her stomach unfolded like a balloon, the braid of cramp removed like an unpicked seam.

The doctor pulled the last needle out of her right kneecap. “Now, how do you feel?”

“Ah.” Sarah exhaled and inhaled again. “Better, actually. Wow.” She touched the place above her hip that was now soft. “I really feel better.” She took a deeper breath.

“That’s amazing.”

The doctor pulled his stethoscope out of his pocket and slotted the tubes back into his ears, pressing the disc down onto her gut. “Some of the gas has gone.”

“You’re a miracle worker!”

“I just worked on some pressure points.”

“Well...thank-you.” Sarah sat up slowly, peeling her legs off the vinyl mattress.

“That’s great.”

“It will probably hurt again, though.”

Her thighs *thwacked* off the mattress. “Why? Do you think it might be something serious?”

“No. But if you get, well, stressed again, it could start hurting.” He sat down at his desk. “I’ll prescribe some herbs.”

“I should work on my relaxation techniques too, I guess.” She cradled her warm abdomen. “If I got more acupuncture done in Adelaide, do you think it would end up hurting less? Once I got used to the needles.”

“I think so. Although pain is a strange thing, you know?” He pivoted in his chair to look up at her; she noticed for the first time the grey hair on his temples. “It can take a long time to get used to.”

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As Sarah walked back along the street the aroma of frying onions and sugared sauce wafted out of an open-front cafe. *Hold off*, she told herself, *you'll be eating in a couple of hours*.

Her stomach answered her with a growl.

A plump woman in blue t-shirt and jeans met her at the top of the stone steps leading to the cafe. "Only you?" She held up a solitary menu, sounded displeased.

"Is that OK?" Sarah asked, loathing herself for the apologetic tone in her voice. *It's hardly the Ritz, lady*, she thought, looking around the dining room. Sheets of cardboard with columns of handwritten characters were taped to tiled white walls; an antique drinks fridge rattled on its haunches. Behind the counter a man in pink rubber gloves was lifting boneless chickens out of a bucket. Rattling wall fans buffered diners at white plastic tables, keeping a screeching version of *Nights in White Satin* virulently airborne.

"You come this way." The woman walked along the exposed front of the cafe, past a family bending over bowls of noodles as if in prayer, past two grey-haired men contemplating a faded board crowded with chequers, past a group of women in hijabs nursing brightly coloured shopping bags. The waitress stopped at a small table in the corner of the room.

"Thanks." Sarah pulled the chair back as far as it would go before it hit the wall. The menu landed with a heavy *whoomp* on the table, making the soy sauce rock in its plastic dish. "Oh, right." Sarah opened the improbably thick folder, staring at a spread of confusingly-arranged photos: a plate of omelettes and chips next to a whole glazed duck on a bed of greens, baked beans on charred rafts of toast beside a bowl of grey soup adorned with a fish head. "Can I think about it for a moment?"

"You want something to drink," the woman told her.

“Oh, sure. A Diet Coke, thanks.”

The waitress walked away, stopping to clear empty steins from a table; one of the drinkers raised his glass suddenly, narrowly missing her head.

Staring out onto the street Sarah saw a white-haired woman walking along the pavement carrying two large plates of grey mince. The woman stopped under a tree by the edge of the cafe, squatting awkwardly so her generous backside bulged through her navy trousers. She set the plates down on the serpentine knots of root; pivoted and sat, heavily, with her back to the wide dark trunk of the tree. Sarah watched as she stirred the sloughs of meat with a fork, turning up clods of dark meat.

“Ready now?”

Sarah looked around as the waitress dumped a can of Diet Coke down in front of her. “Oh.” Her eyes returned to the epic menu. “Sorry, I got distracted.”

“You need *another* minute?”

“If that’s OK...” Something small and dark caught the corner of Sarah’s eye. She glanced around. A tiny black cat was standing motionless on the edge of the footpath, its skeletal head too large for its emaciated frame, its face pinched like that of a papier-mâché puppet. The old woman slowly picked up the fork and extracted a carbuncle of mince from the slop. The cat stared at the lump; skin fluttered beneath its ribs. Suddenly it bounced across the roots towards the plate, bending its tiny head over the slurry of meat.

“Oh, that’s sweet,” Sarah murmured.

The waitress leaned across the table, looking out into the street. “I wish she wouldn’t do that.”

“Do what? Feed the cat?”

“Mmm.”

“It can’t hurt that much, can it? Feeding one cat?”

“You feed one, you have to feed all of them. You see?” The waitress nodded at the street.

Two more brown cats had appeared and were eating cheek by jowl from one of the plates; their half-tails bounced like metronomes. A tabby scrap was hanging out of the hollow of the tree, spindly front-paws spreadeagled across the bark. A black cat sprang out of the drain by the road and ran on three legs toward the plate, the stump of its fourth leg cocked like a trigger beneath its belly.

“They spread disease,” the waitress continued. “And they make a mess.”

“Where do they all come from?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know. They used to live in hedges, but the hedges are all gone.” The waitress shrugged dismissively. “I think all the cats will be gone soon too.”

“Not while you have people feeding them.”

The waitress eyed the old woman, then looked down at the menu. “Are you ready?”

“No,” Sarah said sharply.

The woman paused, then opened Sarah’s can with a long fingernail; liberated carbon water surged over her fingernail. “I’ll give you another minute.” She jabbed the frothing gap with a bendy straw.

Sarah watched the straw rising like a pink periscope out of her Diet Coke before looking back at the road. The woman was still seated beneath the tree, motionless beside the writhing circles of cat. Her head was bowed and Sarah suspected she was falling asleep; her suspicions were confirmed when the woman’s right hand slid forward, slapping the edge of one of the plates. Several cats jumped backwards, startled by the sudden blow from the hand that had been feeding them.



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Glass doors opened into a circus maximus of a mall; the tiered arena reverberated with noise and flashing lights. Store-signs were sported like pennants above glowing windows. A network of escalators wove like a metal shoelace between the levels; shoppers ascended motionless as bottles on a conveyor belt. A glass elevator took off with a polyphonic chime towards a dome painted to look like the sky; amongst the crush of legs Sarah could see a child kneeling in the corner of the cabin with hands pressed against the glass.

Searching the rings of stores on the ground floor for somewhere she might get a costume, Sarah noticed the black and white sign for what had been her favourite book chain in Europe. *No*, she told herself, looking away, focusing on a nearby window display of high heels arched like stretching cats. *Your spending on books has gone way beyond the profligate stage.*

Her gaze drifted back to the monochrome sign. Beneath the large white brand name the small italicised *books* read like a reassuring whisper.

The mall-mix of music died away as she walked through the sensor gates into the store. The open plan space was pregnant with the sounds of hushed browsing. A pillar at the front of the shop was lined with multiple copies of the same large book, as though the merchandisers were experimenting with a Maoist approach to bookselling. Each black cover repeated a montage of exotic photos; identical images of canyons and weathered rock statues and Eiffel Towers at dusk. A woman in a navy and gold sari was thumbing through a copy of the thick tome; another woman in jeans and a belted shirt joined her, glancing at the books as she tucked a bag of fresh purchases into her tote. “*1001 Places You Have To See Before You Die,*” she read off one of the covers. “Goodness, what a horrible concept. You would never get to stand still.”

“There are only two places we have to see in Singapore.” The woman in the sari flicked to a page near the end of the book. “Oh, and I’m pretty sure they’ve just knocked one of them down.”

A young sales assistant materialised like a vision in front of Sarah; an elfin face wreathed in feathered bleached hair. “Can I help you find something?” Her voice was high and hopeful.

“I’m fine, thanks,” Sarah replied, a little depressed by her energy.

“You don’t want help?” The girl puckered glossed lips; Sarah sensed she was mentally re-reading the part of her training manual that gave tips on persistence. “I can’t even point you towards something?”

*So young, and so eager to help*, Sarah thought, taking in the girl’s neatly pressed store-shirt, her line of carefully chosen wrist accessories, the gold star on her name-tag. *How soon that will change*. “OK, well.” She remembered Bradley sitting by the window. “Do you know if you have anything about hungry ghosts?”

“Hungry ghosts?” The girl blinked lids paved with gold eye shadow.

“My friend was talking about this belief, um, some people have about spirits that aren’t buried properly having hungry ghosts. Or something.” She watched the girl’s expression degenerate into a frown. *I’m offending her*. The thought produced a paralysis of the kind caused by glass breaking underfoot; her muscles tensed and her stomach flipped. “I probably got it wrong. Or he did. Don’t worry.”

“Do you mean the Hungry Ghosts Festival?” the girl asked slowly.

“There’s a festival?” Sarah sighed in relief.

The relief seemed mirrored in the girl’s features. “It’s not really a festival but it’s what it gets called. During this one month of the year people go and burn stuff for the ghosts that have come out of Hell. Paper money and stuff.” She nodded as if answering her own question. “It’s kind of like Halloween, you know? Older people get into it a lot.” Her eyes flickered across Sarah’s face

as if mentally including her in the bracket. “I can’t think of any books about it though.” Her eyes roamed the wide plain of texts.

“Look, that’s fine. I can just browse...”

“Adrien! Adrien!” the girl called out to an assistant pushing a hand trolley across the floor; her voice had a touching urgency to it.

“Yeah.” The boy wheeled sharply over to her, halting in a showy half-circle; several of the cookbooks on his trolley clattered to the floor. “You OK?” He looked sharply at Sarah as if suspecting her of menacing his co-worker.

“Do we have any books about hungry ghosts?” the girl asked him.

“Yeah.” The boy nodded at the girl and took off down an aisle, leaving the trolley where it was.

“Follow him.” Bangles jangled as the girl waved Sarah on.

Sarah followed the young man who was striding to the point of bouncing, his converse sneakers lifting off the floor as though he was a gymnast easing into a run-up. The books on either side of him looked enticingly new, their fresh faced covers displayed spaciously on treated pine shelves. *If only they stayed looking like that.* Sarah thought of the tin racks of books at her library, the spines wreathed in smoggy plastic, a dank smell rising from the press of migratory texts that suggested an unknowable history of touch and breath and drool.

“OK, hungry ghosts.” The clerk pulled up sharply at a shelf offering **FAITH** and squatted down; his taut backside bounced on his raised heels as though his knees had springs. “Here.” He selected a book with a golden spine from the lowest shelf and flicked it up at Sarah.

She caught it awkwardly between clapped hands. ““*THE TIBETAN BOOK OF LIVING AND DYING.*”” She tilted the cover horizontally, checking if it was only in her imagination the

word DYING seemed more pronounced than the rest of the title: the red print a deeper scarlet, the black shadowing more emphatic.

“Yep.” The sales assistant eased himself up slowly and tugged the chain securing his baggy black jeans.

“And this is about hungry ghosts?” She turned over to the back cover to escape the DYING. A blurb by Richard Gere was printed above the hefty price-tag.

“It talks about them in one of the chapters.” The clerk took the book back and bent it open at the index; she heard the barely perceptible snap of spine glue getting irreparably cracked.

“Yeah.” Pages rattled between his fingers like cards in an automatic shuffler. A thick thumb slowed and then stopped the process. He read quickly. “*Six realms of existence are identified in Buddhism: gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hells. They are each the result of one of the six main negative emotions: pride, jealousy, desire, ignorance, greed, and anger.*” He sucked in a delayed breath and glanced across the page. “And there’s a bit more...”

*No, mate, you’re not going to be reading it all out to me.* “Thanks.” Sarah tugged the book back from him and squinted at the thick chunks of tiny print; it reminded her of a story she’d once heard about monks writing on pinheads. She was relieved when the young man tapped an ink-brick paragraph.

“That’s the hungry ghosts bit,” he said.

She leaned closer and read:

*‘If some parts of California and Australia spring to mind as the realm of the gods, you can see the demigod realm being acted out every day perhaps in the intrigue and rivalry of Wall Street or in the seething corridors of Washington and Whitehall. And the hungry ghost realms? They exist wherever people, though immensely rich, are never satisfied, craving to take over this company or that one, or endlessly playing out their greed in court cases.’*

“Did you find something?” the salesgirl’s voice chirruped in Sarah’s ear.

“Yeah.” The young man stretched, pressing out his chest through his baggy t-shirt, and propped a boot on the lowest shelf. “It’s under control.”

“Oh, thank-you.” A shy lilt entered the salesgirl’s voice.

Sarah let them look at each other for a second. “I’m confused, though.”

The male clerk looked at Sarah sharply; she sensed she was outstaying her welcome.

“This book seems to suggest hungry ghosts can be alive,” she persevered.

“Yeah, and?” He shot a look at the salesgirl.

“Well, I got the impression they weren’t.” Sarah started to feel irritatingly stupid.

“I was telling this lady about the Hungry Ghosts Festival,” the girl added.

His tone softened as he looked at his colleague. “Oh, that’s something different.”

“It is?” the female clerk asked.

“Yeah.” He grinned at her. “Similar, but different. That’s more a Taoist thing, and this is more Buddhist.”

“Sorry. I get confused.” She giggled deprecatingly back at him.

He shrugged. “I get confused too, and I’m an existentialist.”

“Ooh, that’s so cool.”

“Um, so what you’re saying is...” Sarah ploughed on.

Remnants of dew were still in the male clerk’s eyes as he cut Sarah off. “OK, it’s like this.” He punched his palm. “Buddhists basically believe there are six realms, yeah? So six ways in which we can live our lives. Gods have the best existences and ghosts have one of the worst.

Because, like the book says, no matter what they have, hungry ghosts always want more. They're always hungry and they're never going to just enjoy what they have." He ended with the lecture with an open-armed flourish in the direction of his colleague.

"Oh wow. That really makes sense." The salesgirl nodded appreciatively.

"Buddhist philosophy is pretty easy to get the hang of, once you've read a book or two about it." He shrugged nonchalantly. "Now Sufism, that's tricky."

"My ex-boyfriend was like a hungry ghost. He was always asking his parents for more stuff and they always gave it to him, even though he didn't need it. That's why we broke up, I guess." The salesgirl played coyly with a chunky bracelet as she looked back at Sarah. "Your friend who told you about the hungry ghosts. He's not like that, is he?"

"No." Sarah paused. "Not as far as I can tell, at least. He's not really my friend, actually, he's more just someone I met in passing."

"That's good. You wouldn't want to hang out with someone who was a hungry ghost." The girl's eye's slid sideways towards the male clerk.

"No." Sarah stared down at the text; the phrase *never satisfied* formed in the miasma of miniature words. As she scanned the page other words bobbed to the surface of the soup; *immensely rich, craving, endlessly, hungry*. "No, I don't know anyone like that." She snapped the book shut and thrust it back at the surprised looking male clerk. "Thanks, you've both been a great help. But I really do just want to browse for a bit." She turned to the salesgirl. "Could you just point me towards your romance section?"

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“Paul, I need you to do me up.” She glanced through the bathroom door at Paul, who was tracing a moustache on his upper lip with her eyeliner.

“What do you think?” He turned his head.

Sarah took in the twin lines of black kohl curled above his mouth; the frayed straw hat slung around his neck; the garish green poncho draped across his shoulders. “You look like an entrant for a Mexican Gay Mardi Gras.”

His grin widened. “That’s exactly the look I was going for.”

“Come do me up.” Sarah held the moulded cups of her black corset over her breasts.

He peered closer at his image. “Do you think I should make the tips a bit pointier?”

“You could be helping me get into erotic clothing and you’re worrying about your makeup mo?”

“Alright, alright.” Paul sauntered out of the bathroom, his thumbs hooked on the waistband of his corduroy trousers, his elbows angled out beneath lime mohair. “Just wanting to make myself hot for you, baby.” He rested his hands on Sarah’s shoulders. “What are we doing?”

“I’m breathing in and you’re pulling.”

“Said the vicar to the bishop.” Paul took hold of the trailing laces and tugged, inserting his knee into her back as she stumbled backwards.

“Ow!” She glared over her shoulder at him. “Get your knee out of my arse!”

“Sorry.” He performed a series of bone-crushing yanks. “How’s that?”

“Perfect. We didn’t want to have kids anyway, did we?” Sarah stared discontentedly in the mirror at breasts puffed like pasties. “I look absolutely flabulous.”

“You look great. Money well spent, my dear.”

“Yes. A *lot* of money, I might add.” Sarah pulled the lace ruching free from her bodice. “And if you need any further proof of my feeling for you, you should know I agreed to try on, and subsequently buy, an extra-large corset for this party. Also that I allowed two extremely petite sales assistants to help me get into it.”

“If only someone had thought to film it.” Paul slurped Sarah’s cheek, then her shoulder.

She stared at him.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“So?”

“So, I dunno.” She looked at the smeared eyeliner on Paul’s stubbly lip; rubbed the transferred kohl off her shoulder. “Did something nice happen at the conference?”

“Yeah, it finished.”

“You weren’t this chipper earlier.” Sarah stepped around him to grab the black shawl on the bed.

“Here, let me.” Paul draped the scarf across her shoulders. “This I like.” He kissed her shoulder through the fabric. “Smells like mothballs?”

“It’s been in a camphor chest for a while.” Sarah hesitated for a moment. “It used to be mum’s.”

“Oh.” Paul’s head snapped upright. “Well, it’s nice.”

Sarah paused and then shrugged the shawl off her shoulders. “It might be too warm to wear it outside.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“God, you *are* in a good mood.”



“Well, it’s this corset.”

Sarah levered his wrist out of the rim of the bodice. “God, something’s happened to make you this bloody ready to go.”

Paul looked at her for a moment and then threw up his hands. “OK, I confess. Something has happened.” He smiled. “Something good has happened.”

“Do I get to know what it is?”

“It’s not official so we need to keep it to ourselves.” He grabbed her arms. “It looks like I’m going to be Corporate Accounts Manager at Paragon.”

“Oh?” Sarah stared at Paul. “Oh, really?”

“Really.” His grip on her shoulders tightened. “Rollo came and spoke to me after my paper. He said that he’d had me in mind for the job for ages, he just wanted to wait until after I gave my presentation to mention it. He didn’t want me taking my foot off the pedal too early.”

“Oh, yes, couldn’t have you doing that.”

“Sarah, Sarah.” His fingers pressed the tense muscles under her shoulder blades. “This is a happy moment. A good moment.”

She pulled him into a furry hug. “And I’m happy for you, babe. I’m so pleased that you’ve been asked to be a ...”

“A Corporate Account Manager?” Paul murmured after a moment.

“Yeah.” She squeezed tighter. “I’m so happy.”

“This is going to be so good. For both of us.” He disentangled himself from the hug; studied her face. “This job is really going to lead to us being a special part of the...of the...”

“The Paragon family?”

“Well, get you.” He arched a groomed eyebrow in surprise.

“Mother Marg was talking to me about that earlier.”

“Marg mentioned she’d seen you.” He kept smiling but his corneas seemed to harden like hammerheads.

Sarah had a sudden panicked recollection of how her chat with Marg had ended. “We had such a nice talk.”

“She said it was nice.” His pupils were sharp as pencil tips.

Her heart fluttered in its pressed cage. “I think by the end of it Marg wanted to adopt me, you know. Make my part in the Paragon family more official.”

“Yup.” He turned and walked over to the window.

*Would she have said something about Bradley?* “It does have a kind of cultish ring to it, by the way.” She swung her arms to seem casual. “The Paragon family. Not that I have a problem with that per se...I mean, I was raised Catholic...”

“Sarah.” He leaned against the darkened half of the window, staring at the unobscured part of the view, the brilliant strip of evening sky.

She waited, her stomach turning back flips.

“I don’t get why I’ve told you this fantastic news and you’re making jokes.” Paul pressed his hand against the molten glass. The webbing between his fingers glowed.

“About the job.” She tried not to sound hopeful.

“Yes, about the job.” His expression was darkened by the radiant pane as he turned to look at her. “I just don’t see why you’re not where I am about it.”

“Where are you?” Relief combined with the tight bodice made her light-headed.

“Sarah, I’m stoked! This is a real fast-track opportunity. It’s really going to set things up.” He strode over to her and gripped her hips. “Look, this is confidential, but…Rollo is talking seriously about taking early retirement. Apparently he’s already got more super than he’ll have time to spend. He might be looking to start grooming a replacement in as little as seven or eight years’ time. God, who knows? He might even end up being willing to go sooner.”

Sarah pulled at the waistband on her corset. “Um, and is that where you see yourself heading?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, is that your plan? To end up running Paragon?”

“Sure. Of course.” He stared incredulously at her. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

She tugged hard on the immovable boning. “I don’t think I realised you wanted to be a boss.”

“Why do you think I’ve been working so hard? Doing all the overtime? So I can stay exactly where I am?” The words snapped like gum in his mouth.

“You like the job you do, don’t you?”

“Of course.” He grinned carnivorously. “But I’d like Rollo’s more.” His grip on her arms tightened. “Ooh, you just shivered.”

“I’m quite exposed.” She rubbed her arms, knocking his hands away. “Not to mention a little deprived of breath.”

“Here.” He stood behind her, loosening her bodice. “If we weren’t due at the party already you’d be in trouble.”

Sarah’s released stomach filled like an airbag. “So that’s where you would want to end up, honey? As the head honcho at Paragon?”

“I dunno if it’s where I’d want to *end up*. Sarah, an hour ago I didn’t know I was going to get a promotion.”

“I get that.” She nodded. “I guess I’m just trying to work out where you see yourself *finally being*.”

His eyes narrowed. “Is this your way of asking me about where we’re heading?”

“No.” She shook her head quickly. “Not at all.”

He paused. “No need to sound so emphatic.”

“I’m just saying...” She tugged distractedly on a loop of lime thread. “Balance is so important, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded uncertainly.

“And I guess you could argue that the higher you move up a corporate ladder, the harder it gets to focus on...other things in your life. To think about stuff that isn’t work-related.”

He threw up his hands. “And here we go.”

“No, we’re not going anywhere!”

He stomped awkwardly along the edge of the bed. “I was waiting for you to raise the red flag.”

“Babe, I’m not raising any flags.” She tried to catch the edge of his flapping poncho. “I just want to know at what point in your career you’ll be happy...”

“I’ll be happy when you’re happy!” he shouted. “When you’re finally impressed by something I do and don’t just, just, piss on it from a great height, then I’ll be happy!” He turned and slouched down on the bed with his back to her; his head was hidden by the brim of his hat.

“I’m sorry, Paul.” She saw his shoulders slump beneath the stiff green matt of his cloak. Guilt washed over her. “You’re so right, I should be happy for you. Please, tell me some more about your new job.”

He bent over for his sandals. “I’d rather just go to the party.”

“Sure. Sure. Let me just have a minute in the bathroom. If your moustache is finalised.”

He didn’t reply.

She walked into the bathroom and slid the door shut. She breathed deeply in and out. It took a moment for her to register the ice bucket in the sink; another to comprehend the champagne bottle sticking out of it. “Paul?” She waited for a reply. “Why is there a bottle of champagne in the bathroom sink?”

He yanked the door open. “Well, I put it there, didn’t I?”

“What is it, a gift from Rollo?”

“This was a gift from me to us.” He folded his arms and leaned backwards against the doorway, one foot jammed against the lintel. “The us that was going to be celebrating something for once in our lives.”

“Oh...” She lifted the champagne out of the bucket and read the buckled label. “*Champagne Rose.*” She looked at Paul. “Oh, Paul. That was the first drink you bought me, you remember? A glass of pink champagne.”

He stared at his raised foot. “It seemed the quickest route to getting some action.”

“Pauly.”

“And I bought this today to make the point we’re going to be able to buy stuff like this from now on. Splash out on stuff. If your conscience allows it.”

“It’s not my conscience that’s the problem.” She stepped over to him. After a moment he lowered the barrier of his raised leg and she buried her forehead in his chest. “It’s my lack of brain. Possibly my lack of sanity,” she murmured.

He stroked the side of her face with his knuckles. “I’m guessing my wearing my mum’s poncho doesn’t help you with that sane feeling.”

“I was actually going to say there was something strangely comforting about it.”

He bent down slowly, resting a hand in the small of her back. She stood up on tiptoes, wobbling in her heeled sandals as she wrapped her arms around his neck, balancing herself as he kissed her.

After a moment she wobbled back down to earth. “So, do you think there’d be time to pop this bad boy?”

He extracted his wristwatch from under the wrap. “Look, we had better get there, Sare.”

“Sure. Plenty of time to celebrate. And I bet there’ll be more appointment to celebrate in the future.”

“Hmmm.” He patted her shoulders, staring at her dough ball breasts.

“What?” Sarah asked as he frowned.

“I’m just thinking, maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to wear the scarf.”

“I knew it.” She folded her hands across her chest. “You do think I look fat.”

He stepped back into the bedroom and grabbed the scarf. “I just think the scarf might make the outfit more elegant, you know? More corporate. I mean, you’re dating an executive now, aren’t you?” He smiled as he handed the scarf to her. “And we can’t have you shivering like that at the party anyway.”

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“That’s the club.” Paul pointed down the boardwalk, a strip of sandfree concrete running a gamut of outlets; shops and restaurants filled the hot dusk air with grinding blends of beats and beans. The windowless white club looked austere against the darkening sky, its curved lilac signage like the words embedded in a stick of Brighton Rock.

“Thank God.” She blew a limp tendril of hair off her forehead. “I’m fricking melting out here.”

“You should try wearing this thing.” Paul flapped his arms out from underneath his poncho. “I feel like I’ve been stuffed into an Alpaca.”

“You’d think being near a beach would help.” Sarah stared down a gap between a juice stand and a surf shop at the deserted shingle; it was crowded like a sandbox cluttered with toys. A pile of kayaks lay in a heap like a pod of beached whales. A man occupied a striped deckchair in an otherwise empty row, a hat spread like a death shroud across his face. Large plastic letters were stacked like a heap of nursery blocks, the bright-coloured characters spelling out BEACH. “First thing we do when we get to the party is find a drink.”

“The first thing we do when we get to the party is mingle. Just remember, there are some really important people here tonight,” Paul told her.

“And you remember...” A wave of panpipes and drums broke over them as they walked into the club. “You remember I’m one of them!”

A young woman in a mauve *pay fung* intercepted them with a tray full of salt-crusted Margaritas. “Good evening.”

“Oh, magic.” Sarah smiled at the girl and grabbed a couple of glasses off the tray, handing one to Paul. “Your health, babe.” She gulped down a frosted mouthful of lemon and brine.

“Sarah, pace yourself.” Paul nudged her. “People will think you’re a lush.”

The sting of the tequila bit in her throat. “They can think what they like now I’m banging the Corporate Account Manager.”

Paul glanced across the room, his eyes suddenly widening. “Oh, there’s Rollo. And he’s coming this way!”

Sarah glanced over her shoulder.

“No, don’t turn around.” Paul grabbed Sarah’s wrist. “Just keep looking at me, OK? And smile like I’m saying something interesting.”

“God, I’ll need a few more of these before I can pull that off.”

“Good evening.”

Sarah turned around.

Rollo was standing behind them; a thin smile cracked the leather binding around his mouth. “Glad you could make it.” He extended a hand towards Paul, making the padded shoulders of his grey jacket rise like a neck brace. “And bonus points for turning up in costume.”

“Just following orders, Rollo.” Paul grinned back at Rollo through nervously fluttering eyelids.

“How marvellous that my wife has someone to play dress-ups with.” Rollo’s fist engulfed Paul’s hand like an anaconda swallowing a mouse; shook it as though trying to crush bones. “She gave up trying with me years ago.” He turned and brushed his cheek across Sarah’s and she caught a pungent whiff of cologne, ethanol laced with spice. “Sarah, lovely to see you. Glad to see you’ve found yourself a drink.”

“Oh, Rollo, I could find a drink under fifty feet of rock,” Sarah said.



Paul's hip slid gently into Sarah's side.

"Yes, I'd say they're almost as strong as the ones Marg makes," Rollo said. "Maybe not quite that strong. My wife's idea of diluting a drink is to add a less potent kind of alcohol." His gaze transited Sarah's cleavage. "I must say I'm very impressed with your costume, Sarah. I imagine there's a bit involved in getting into an outfit like that."

Sarah raised her glass. "You'd need to buy me a couple of these for a start."

Rollo's eyebrow arched like a fishhook.

"Ah, Sarah." Paul's second hip-and-shoulder was firmer. "Isn't she a character, Rollo?"

"She certainly is." Rollo's reply was slow and thoughtful, as though something was occurring to him.

Sarah looked at the small groups of people lining the walls of the space, huddled like fugitives trying to avoid the searchlights circling the empty dance floor. She spotted one woman in red clogs that looked vaguely Mexican, a man who had what could be a bandana tied over the collar of his jacket. "Doesn't look like too many other people made the effort to dress Latin."

"I'm sure you don't mind standing out." Rollo's smile was a line drawn in cement.

Sarah glanced at Paul. He was staring at Rollo with a dewy-eyed expression.

"And the organisers will be glad to see someone has dressed in theme." Rollo pointed at a large *papier-mâché* donkey standing astride a table in the corner of the space. "They've gone to the trouble of getting in a *piñata*. I can't imagine they'd be too thick on the ground in Singapore."

"Oh, isn't that cute." Sarah stared at the rigid beast; its multicoloured coat was duncoloured in the purple light, its eyes luminous rounds.

Rollo leaned closer to Sarah; his voice pierced the deluge of salsa washing her inner ear. “I hope you can be convinced to lead off the game. I’d love to watch you giving that mighty beast a good whacking.”

*You getting this Paul?* Sarah glanced sharply at her boyfriend. “I’m guessing there’s a bathroom around here somewhere.”

“Bound to be, hons.” He patted her on her way with barely concealed relief.

“I’ll guard the piñata rod for you,” Rollo called out.

*I’d rather you stuck it up your arse.* She walked quickly along the edge of the uncrowded room towards the exit.

In front of her the piñata stared across the aubergine dim, a strangely thoughtful expression in its fixed white eyes, its orange muzzle held high in stoic acceptance of its fate.

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The passageway was lined with dramatic floral wallpaper, giant black hibiscuses firing cannonball tongues into blood red space. The woman walking through the undergrowth was half-camouflaged in her red flamenco dress. Her face was like a white mask. “Sarah?”

“Hello ...” Sarah peered at the woman, taking a moment to recognise the face behind the makeup. “Marg.” She sipped on her drink and grimaced through a mouthful of bitter brine.

“I thought I spied you there.” Marg leaned forward for an air-kiss; violet eyelids fell on glassy eyes. “You look wonderful.”

*And you look tanked.* “So do you, Marg.”

“Oh, I know I don’t. Very much mutton dressed as lamb *roulade*.” Marg kicked out the ruffled flounces of her skirt. “You made it to the party.”

“I said I would.” The comment sounded sharper than Sarah intended.

“I’m so glad you came.” Marg smiled brightly; her fake lashes were primed like fox-traps. “I’m guessing you’ve heard the good news?”

It took Sarah a second too long to register what she meant. “Oh yeah. Paul’s promotion. How cool is that?”

“Very *cool*.”

“We’ll be celebrating hard when we get back to the hotel.”

Marg’s lead white décolletage turned a dull red.

“With pink champagne,” Sarah added quickly.

Marg laughed like something was stuck in her throat. “I hope you feel you can celebrate with us as well.”

“Sure.” Sarah held up her drink. “One more of these and I’ll be celebrating with everyone.”

“The ratio of food to drink does seem strongly weighted in favourite of drink. As per usual with these kinds of events.” Marg sighed. “Oh, good Lord.”

“What’s wrong?”

Marg waved her lacy sleeve foppishly across her face. “I’m just not sure when I became the person who complained about catering arrangements at parties.”

Sarah heard the wistfulness in Marg’s tone; her own softened in response. “It’s nice that you’re aware of stuff like that.”

“Hmmm. I suspect it’s not what the yogis mean by practising mindfulness.”

“Well, someone has to be mindful about provisions, don’t they? That’s what makes your parties so good.”

“I actually intend to scale back on my *parties*, Sarah.” Marg spoke with a sudden slurred resolve. “My goal is to clear the clutter out of my life. Instead of worrying about feeding the five thousand employees I want to focus on spending quality time with a few valued individuals.” Her head lurched forward as if she was on a rocking horse. “Such as you.”

“Me?” Sarah asked, taken aback.

Marg’s giggles sounded like hiccups. “Of course you. As Paul’s partner, you are highly valued. I hope to see a great deal more of you in the future.”

“I know I haven’t been to the last few parties you’ve thrown...” Sarah began uneasily.

“That wasn’t a recrimination.” Marg’s pronunciation held up admirably until the last syllable; only the *tion* came out mashed. “I did wonder, perhaps, for a little while, why you weren’t, well, *ever* coming along to things. But then Paul told me ...” Her eyes widened; for a terrifying moment Sarah thought Marg was going to cry. “Oh, Sarah, I was so sorry to hear about your mother.”

“Thank-you, Marg. That’s kind of you to say.” Sarah hated herself for feeling wary.

“I hope the tart was of use.”

Sarah blinked.

“The passionfruit tart I sent over for the reception after your mother’s...” Marg’s sentence petered out. “Paul said it all went.”

Sarah saw, dully, the remains of the spread at the wake: tea-cups bloodied with lipstick, chicken bones picked clean, half-eaten scones scattered like broken rocks across the tablecloth. “It was very popular, Marg.”

“Paul had mentioned your mother was in poor health. But he didn’t ever explain...” Marg clucked her tongue. “I mean, when you hear someone is unwell that could mean anything, couldn’t it? We’ve had someone off on compo with a bad back for the past four years. Paul should have explained your mother’s situation better.”

“Oh, that’s alright.” Sarah shrugged, trying to ignore the niggling pain in the pit of her stomach. “I didn’t even really talk to my work colleagues about mum until I needed some time off.”

“I would like to think I was more than a work colleague.” A single mirthful hiccup. “To both of you. I want to be more than an *acquaintance* to you, Sarah, I want to be your friend. I mean, Paul’s such a big part of both of our lives.” Her eyelids fluttered like violet awnings in a breeze. “In different ways, of course. We should be friends, shouldn’t we?”

“Oh, yes.” Sarah finished her drink.

“It was one of the reasons I was so keen for you to attend this conference. Why I encouraged Paul to invite you.”

“You encouraged him?” Sarah choked on salt.

“He didn’t tell you?”

Sarah shook her head.

A heavy track started to play in the club; the beat throbbed like a heart through the floor.

“Oh, well...he thought it was a very good idea too. Yes, he was definitely enthusiastic about it.” Marg pursed her lips. “I have said the wrong thing.”

“No.” Sarah shook her head. “God, what does it matter whose idea it was? You both wanted me here. That’s awesome.”

“I wanted you to have a treat, Sarah. I wanted to make up for...for everything that had happened.” Marg suddenly looked anxious; her eyes becoming strangely mobile in their tucked cases.

Sarah’s stomach trembled in sympathy. “You both want me to be a member of the Paragon family.”

“Sarah.” Marg slapped her hands together. “You and I will put this year behind us and start again. What do you think?”

Bass pounded through the floor as Sarah searched for an answer.

“Sorry, that was a little exuberant, wasn’t it?” Marg emitted staccato giggles. “I probably should have eaten something, that cocktail has gone straight to my head. Where there’s plenty of room for it.” The sleeve waved like a hankie. “I have plans, Sarah. Plans for Paul and you as team leaders at Paragon. Fun plans. For a start, I want the pair of you to lead the hike we’re doing along the Kokoda Track next year.”

“Oh, fu-” Sarah swallowed. “Fun.”

“Rollo tried to lead a group a few years back but he sprained his ankle on the second day and the porters ended up having to carry him back to base camp. I would love you both to show him up by doing better than him. Paul as his rightful successor and you...” Her gaze was suddenly piercing. “And you.”

*Thud, thud,* went the drums, *thud, thud.*

“I don’t know how I’d fare on the Kokoda Track,” Sarah said. “Paul might do OK. I know he enjoyed that paintballing challenge you guys did on Anzac Day.”

“Sarah, he was coated head to toe with mud. And I don’t want to think about what else.”

“I remember him coming home smelling like a paddock.”

“It was worse before he showered. Do you want to see?” Marg opened her clutch purse.

“You have a photo?”

Marg pulled out a phone; pressed the keyboard with acrylic nails. The screen flashed up an image; LCD light bathed the triumphant smile playing on Marg’s lips. “Here.” She handed the phone to Sarah.

Paul was standing astride a hay bale in a paint-splattered boiler suit, bits of gum leaf plastered to his plastic helmet, a green metal paint rifle clutched against his chest. He was poking his tongue out at the camera. His eyes were dancing.

*Thud thud thud thud.*

“That’s a really nice photo,” Sarah said.

“There’s more...” Marg checked herself. “Let me forward it to you.”

“I don’t get images on my phone. It’s a crappy old version. Paul’s always saying I should upgrade.”

Marg reached out for the phone.

Sarah hit the arrow key.

Another photo appeared fast as a wink: two blurry heads, Paul and Marg, pressed together to fit the frame. Paul’s outstretched arm in the corner of the shot, holding the camera upright: his chest bare. A smile Sarah had not seen before.

Marg grabbed at the phone; Sarah released it and it fell on the floor between them.

Marg stared at her. “I had no idea how ill your mother was. Paul didn’t tell me.”

“What else hasn’t he told me, Marg?”

Marg's eyes watered dangerously, but another strangely triumphant smile appeared on her lips. She knelt down for the phone.

Sarah stomped on the screen, her heel sliding across the impermeable plastic. The floor trembled under her feet as she walked away.

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Sarah looked out across the sea, the water shimmering like mercury in the setting sun.

“Sarah?”

She looked down at her feet, watching the tide roll over them, drown her feet in foam.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” Paul said. “Where have you been?”

“That’s what I’ve been wondering.”

“Huh?”

She looked back at the ocean, the glowering ball of sun deflating on the horizon. “Where I’ve been all this time.”

“You ...you realise you’ve probably busted Marg’s phone. It cost eight hundred bucks and she reckons you’ve bust it,” Paul said.

“Finally, some good news.” Sarah giggled jerkily.

Paul’s brogues crunched the ice-white sand. “Sarah, did she say something that upset you? I mean, what’s ...”

He came to an abrupt halt as she looked at him.

The gap between them filled with hissing water.



“What did she say?” he asked.

“Nothing.” A tear rolled off her cheek; joined the ocean. “She didn’t need to say anything.”

Shadows blacked Paul’s creased eyes.

Certainty struck Sarah with the force of walking into a glass door. “Oh, Paul.” She bent over, winded. “Oh, shit.”

“Sarah, it’s not like that.” His voice went childishly high. “Look, why don’t we go back inside? Please? We’ll talk when we’ve cooled down.”

“I’m not going back inside.” Her voice cracked and she stared past him at the salsa club glowing on the boardwalk, its porch bathed in ghastly purple light, cigarettes swirling like fireflies around the heads of mauve drinkers. “I’m not going back inside,” she repeated; a skerrick of joy stirred momentarily in her heavy stomach.

“Marg and I didn’t do anything...” He took another step towards her.

She kicked through the surf at him, spraying his trousers with gluggy sand until he retreated.

“I saw the photos, Paul!” She stared up at the sky, watching a lone star glint through the belt of orange cloud. Rolling tears left cool lines on her cheeks.

“We never had sex.”

“Oh, God.” Her body shook with suppressed sobs. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Please,” he whispered, “please, Sarah.”

“How long have you two been...been on together?”

“It’s not like that.”

She stomped the sand and cool water shocked her knees. “How long?”

“Look, after the paintballing trip we got pissed and sort of...we knew it was a mistake straight away,” Paul added defensively.

“Anzac Day. April.” The nothingness lurched in nausea as she counted backwards. “Five months.”

“It’s not like we’ve been having an af-” He sawed off the last syllable with a sigh. “We’ve had a few meaningless fool arounds.” He ran fingers through his bedraggled fringe. “It’s never been planned. Things have only happened at all because you and Rollo have cancelled a lot of stuff recently...”

Sarah rounded on him. “You what?”

He held up his arms, backing off. The damp sides of his poncho drooped like the wings of a wet fly.

“You’re kidding me.” Her head felt like it was filled with helium; her feet with lead. “You’re putting this back on me?”

“No. But I’ve been alone a lot recently,” he mumbled. “I know things have been tough for you, but they haven’t been that easy for me either. And every time I’ve tried to talk to you about work and stuff you just haven’t seemed to care.”

Her gut sank with the receding water. “Whereas Mother Marg has always been waiting for you with open arms.”

“You don’t have to call her that.” His eyes flashed like black bottle-tops.

“You want to know what I’d really like to call her?” Her voice went shrill; she wanted to stab him with her words. “Was it a comfort, Paul? Was it something to look forward to when things were getting tough at home?”

“Sarah, nothing that happened between me and Marg was planned. Really.” The wrinkles around his mouth lengthened in the dying light, and she suddenly saw what he would look like as an old man. “It never meant anything.”

She wanted to slap him, bring him back to life. “It meant a leg-up in your career.”

“Don’t...” He looked uncomfortable. “That’s a low thing to say.”

“Lowin’ than fuckin’ your way to the top?”

He blanched. “I got this promotion on my merits.”

“Actually you’re probably right.” Acid flooded the empty pit of her stomach. “I don’t see you getting a promotion based on your performance in the sack. Although Rollo must be glad to have another rat in the ranks.”

“Sarah, you wouldn’t tell Rollo.” He suddenly looked petrified. “Please, I know you’re mad, but you can’t tell him. It would ruin everything.”

“*That* would ruin...” She shook her head dazedly. “My God. My God, Paul. I really have been on another fucking planet.”

“I get that you hate me. And that’s fair enough.” He was rambling. “But I really need you to think about the damage it would cause everyone.”

She waded into the water to drown him out; wavelets bobbed around her trembling knees. “How did I end up with you? How did I end up stuck with you, stuck in Adelaide, stuck caring for...” Rage surged like a wave. “None of this was supposed to happen! I was never supposed to be here!”

When she turned around Paul was gaping at her; his eyes hollow sockets in his skeletal face.

“I won’t tell Rollo, Paul.” Her voice sounded so quiet she wasn’t sure it had carried until an expression of relief softened Paul’s features. “Now go away.”

“I can’t leave you like this.” He sounded uncertain.

“All I want is for you to vanish.” She turned back towards the tide.

“Have you...have you at least got money for a cab back to the hotel?”

“I will start screaming in about thirty seconds,” she told the ocean. After counting to seventeen she turned around.

Paul was walked back across the beach, his form disappearing into the sooty darkness.

She fell forward onto her hands and knees, letting the swell slap her chin. After a moment she put her head under water and screamed into the void.

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Grey clouds drifted across indigo sky. Wavelets slapped at Sarah’s feet; the breeze tickled and stung her bare soles. A sharp clinking noise, like a bit of a bridle clinking on a carthorse, penetrated the hiss and sigh of the tide. Rolling her head to the side she saw a tiny dog careening along the beach towards her, its stumpy legs kicking furiously under its rigid torso, its loose lead slapping like a whip at its side. It pulled up sharply in front of Sarah’s legs, contemplating the sandy wedge of her right foot. Taking a step forward it snuffled her ankle, then nipped at a loose piece of skin on her heel.

*Still alive, dog, Sarah thought, nudging it away. Try again in an hour.*

“Dragon!” A voice called from further up the beach. “Dragon, you come here!”

Dragon cocked its ears and glanced furtively around. Sarah, following its gaze, saw a woman walking quickly across the beach towards them. “Dragon!” She slapped her hand on her hip and Dragon buried its tiny head in the arch of Sarah’s foot.

“So sorry.” The woman nodded at Sarah as she approached. “He’s very naughty. Dragon, come here!”

Sarah looked down at the dog. “Go on, Dragon.” She gave the dog a gentle sideways push. He snarled and butted his head against her ankle.

“Dragon, you’re so naughty.” The woman squatted down awkwardly and scooped the dog up into the air, making it yap and wriggle furiously. “Oh, stop it, silly boy.” The woman dropped her bronze tote bag and pulled out a small chew toy, a rubber figurine of a girl with half its face gnawed off. “Here, have your toy.”

She waved the toy under Dragon’s pointed muzzle. Dragon glared at it for a moment and then chomped down on its eroded scalp.

“Good boy.” The woman cradled the dog in the crook of her arm, blanketing it with her bosom. “He’s very tired,” she told Sarah. “He gets moody when he’s tired. Don’t you, Dragon?” She scratched behind the dog’s pert ears and he growled on his mouthful of latex. “Oh, very grumpy.” The woman chuckled. “I better put him to bed soon.”

Sarah looked away, staring out at the dark slab of ocean.

The woman rolled forward, preparing to stand up. Her hand touched the edge of Sarah’s skirt. “Oh, this is wet.”

Sarah crossed her arms across her sodden chest and smiled tightly.

The woman pressed the folds of Sarah’s skirt between her fingers. “You are soaked!”

Sarah’s head throbbed as she sat up and tugged her skirt out of the woman’s grasp. “It’s fine. I’ll dry off.”

“You won’t.” The woman shook her permed ringlets. “It’s too humid, you know? The air is too wet.” She lay her hand on the side of Sarah’s corset. “Oh, so wet.”

“Really, I’m fine.”

The woman looked at her for a moment and then stood up awkwardly, walking over to a green-and-white striped deckchair. She lifted up one of the chair’s legs and hooked Dragon’s leash under it. “Stay.” She pointed a stiff finger at Dragon and walked back to her bag. “I have a towel.”

“Look really...” Sarah swallowed. “I’m OK.”

“You can get dry.” The woman knelt by the tote and lifted a pile of boxes out of it. “Here.” She pulled out a folded white towel.

“I don’t want to get your towel all wet.”

“Don’t worry.” The woman waved her hand. “I have lots of towels.”

“Well...OK. OK, thank-you.” Sarah took the towel and began patting her arms. The woven fabric was warm and soft on her clammy skin.

“Better?”

“Yeah.” Sarah lifted up her hair and rubbed the moist back of her neck. “Thanks, that is better.”

“How did you get so wet?”

“I went for a swim.” Sarah pressed her face into the towel.

“By yourself?”

Sarah nodded, rubbing the crown of her head.

“You’re in Singapore by yourself?”

“I was here with my boyfriend, but...” She masked the wobble in her voice with a cough. “He’s gone.” The tears welled up in her eyes; she patted her trembling eyelids with the towel.

The woman was silent for a moment. “Here.” She took the towel from Sarah and shuffled around behind her. “I’ll dry your hair.”

“Oh, that’s fine...” A white triangle of fabric fell into Sarah’s eyes.

“I always take a towel when we go to the beach.” The woman’s voice was muffled through the folds of towel buffeting Sarah’s ears. “Dragon likes to swim.”

“Ah.” Sarah closed her eyes as the towel slapped her forehead. The woman’s warm palms brushed against her cheeks; she recognised her perfume.

“If he doesn’t get dry after a swim he can catch a cold.” The woman began massaging the back of Sarah’s scalp, forcing her to tilt her head forward. “He has a very sensitive chest.”

Sarah nodded involuntarily with the rhythm of the towel, thinking about the perfume box standing dusty sentinel on her mother’s dressing table, the tapered bottle inside, half-full.

*Saved for special occasions*, she thought.

She looked down at the collection of boxes the woman had taken out of her tote: black boxes tied with silver ribbon, bamboo containers secured with brass latches. The largest tin had a picture of a beautiful young woman on the lid, her hair secured with gold and pearl hair pins, her lips set in a soft smile.

“These are mooncakes.” The woman nodded at the boxes. “Every year at this time we give them to people we want to stay on good terms with.” The woman massaged the damp hair on Sarah’s scalp, rubbing the aching lumps of muscle on her temples. “People give a lot to their mothers-in-law.”

“Right.”

“And I have three married children. So plenty of mooncakes.” the woman bundled up Sarah’s mane and towelled it vigorously, “Not many visits, you know, all of my children are too busy to visit me.” She squeezed the ends of Sarah’s hair. “But tonight they took me to a nice seafood restaurant and gave me lots and lots of mooncakes. More than I can carry.” She whipped the towel through the air; the white fabric cracked like lightning.

Sarah heard choking noises coming from beside the deckchair and looked around. Dragon was lunging towards a heron wading along the shoreline, hauling the huge weight of the deckchair behind him. The diamante yoke of his collar was stretched across his shoulders. He yelped and the heron took off, its grey wings flapping hard through the still night.

“Oh, Dragon, stop it.” The woman shook her head. “Very grumpy now. Very tired.” She lightly touched Sarah’s hair. “You’re drier now.”

Sarah reached up, feeling the tousled back of her head. “I am. Thank-you.” She looked at the woman, feeling strangely awkward. “That was really kind of you.”

“I’m used to it. Three children, four dogs, lots of baths.” The woman folded the towel into a neat square and dropped it back in the tote. “Before you go to bed tonight, give your hair a good wash. Get the salt out.”

Sarah watched the woman stacking up her pile of mooncakes. “Here, let me help you.” She stood up and picked up a large red carton shaped like a pagoda. “Wow, this is heavy.”

The woman tapped the column of embossed characters on the carton’s slanted roof. “This says, ‘*Double Yolk, White Lotus Paste.*’ These mooncakes are very good quality. My oldest daughter-in-law gave me four boxes. She must feel guilty about something.” She stuffed the box into her tote. “Just not guilty enough to help me carry them all to the car.”

Sarah bent over and picked up the tin with the woman on it. “This is a beautiful tin.” She stared closer at the woman’s lovely face, the wistful expression in her eyes. “Really lovely.”



“This is Chang Er.” The woman’s index finger clanked on the tin. “The woman who went to the moon.”

“Oh, right.”

“The story is that her husband was an archer who shot down nine suns that were going to destroy the earth, and a goddess gave him a magic potion as a reward. But his beautiful wife Chang Er got curious about the potion, and drank it before he could stop her. And at once she began to float away to the moon. The archer begged her to come back, but when he realised she couldn’t he threw her pet rabbit up into her arms, so at least she wouldn’t be alone on the moon.”

Sarah smiled. “And that’s how you get the rabbit in the moon?”

“My boys always liked that bit of the story. They would feel so sad for Chang Er, up there in the moon all by herself, so I would say no, no, she has a rabbit to keep her company, and if you look up at the moon you can see it. It’s very big because Chang Er always gives it lots to eat.” The woman reached out to take the tin from Sarah and stopped, pushing it back towards her instead.

“You want this?”

“Oh. No.” Sarah shook her head. “No, I was just saying I like the tin.”

“You can have it.” The woman waved dismissively at the tin. “I have too many already.”

“Oh, but I can’t take your mooncakes.” Sarah watched the woman ram the rest of the boxes into her tote.

“I can’t eat them all!” The woman waved her hand at the boxes. “I’m supposed to be on a diet! I’ll have to give them all to Dragon!” She wrestled with the zip of her overstuffed bag. “I told my children I wanted low-sugar mooncakes but they must have forgotten.”

“But if they’re expensive...”

“Not that expensive.” The woman yanked the zip halfway across her bag and paused to wipe her forehead with the back of her hand. “Really, keep the box. Maybe you can give it to your mother-in-law.”

“Oh, I don’t have a mother-in-law.” *That ship just sailed*, she thought.

“Oh, my daughter-in-law would be very jealous of you.” The woman yanked the zip the rest of the way up. “Well, give it to your mother then.”

“I don’t...” Sarah paused. “I don’t think there’s enough room in my suitcase.”

“You can post them to...where are you from?”

“Australia.”

“You can post them to Australia. It wouldn’t cost that much.” The woman stood up and brushed off her skirt. “Mothers love getting things from their children. It’s how we know you are still thinking about us.” She walked over to the deckchair and pulled out Dragon’s leash, jerking her hand away as he snapped at her fingers. “Stop it, silly boy.” She nodded at Sarah. “Remember to wash your hair. And brush it too, or it will get tangled.”

“You sound like my mother.” Sarah looked away at the ocean, staring at the barely distinguishable line between black sea and sky. “Thanks again for the mooncakes.”

“Make sure your mother gets them.”

“I will.”

The woman nodded at her as she walked heavily away, Dragon bouncing against her ankles. Sarah looked up at the hazy spread of stars on the horizon; imagined, for an aching moment, a place she could send something where her mother would still get it.

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In her dream she was standing in a deep pit, digging into dark soft soil. Her shovel repeatedly struck what sounded like a plastic tub, although every time she looked down she saw only black dirt, bits of bone, bunches of white lilies that had sprung up around her feet. She heard Bradley's voice calling down to her, shouting through the gale blowing into the pit: *Don't worry, love! The earth's coming alive, that's all!* Someone stood behind her; above the shriek of the wind she thought she could hear her laughing.

Sarah woke up and turned on the bedside lamp; rolled onto her side to escape the full force of the light. She was momentarily confused by the unoccupied left side of the bed, the beige bedspread smooth as a clay tablet wiped blank. The ticking of her alarm clock slowly cut its way into her consciousness and she sat up groggily. As she reached for her glass of water she knocked the bedside phone out of its cradle. Bending down to pick up the handset she thought, *I should call mum.*

She stared at the catacomb of holes on the mouthpiece, letting the drone of dial tone turn into protesting beeps before putting the handset back in its cradle. Levering herself off the bed she walked over to the mini-bar, pulling out the icebox and filling a tumbler. Grabbing the champagne bottle she walked across the room, manoeuvring the sliding door open and stepping out onto the balcony.

The narrow concrete space was bare except for a pair of wire chairs and a small metal table with a large tin ashtray as its centrepiece. She put the bottle on the table and ripped the trimmings off its neck, gritting her teeth as she gripped the exposed cork. Pressurised air exploded under her fist.

“What the hell...”

A plume of grey smoke rose above the high wall of the neighbouring balcony; it was followed, a moment later, by the irate face of a woman. She glared at Sarah, her cigarette angled like the butt of a smoking rifle. “What the hell are you playing at?”

“Oh, sorry. Sorry, I thought I was the only one out here...”

“Just a bit louder and you would have been.” The woman took a quick drag of her cigarette and blew the excess smoke through her nose. Sarah recognised her as the woman she’d seen smoking outside the hotel the day before.

*God, she’s been next door the whole time, she thought. Wonder what she made of it all.*

The woman turned her sharp gaze on the bottle in Sarah’s hand. “Bit early, isn’t it? Or are you carrying on?”

“We’ve all got our vices, I suppose.” Sarah glanced pointedly at the cigarette.

“I suppose we do.”

Sarah angled a trickle of rose wine down the side of her glass; the ice snapped beneath the liquid.

“But it’s rare form to be drinking champagne at this hour. Shouldn’t you at least wait for breakfast?” The woman flicked her cigarette too early and the glowing ember fell loose from its charred sleeve. “Ah.” She clicked her tongue and pulled a Zippo out of her blouse pocket. Sarah watched the souped-up flame tear through the paper; yellow light flared on the woman’s grey forehead.

“Are you an Australian?” the woman gasped through inhaled smoke.

“Yeah.” Sarah poured more champagne into the tumbler.

The woman puffed hard on her cigarette to make the tobacco take. “I thought you were. Either that or a New Zealander.”

“I think if in doubt you’re supposed to guess New Zealander.”

“But I was quite sure you were an *Australian*.” The woman’s plummy English accent elongated the word, rounding out the *Aus* with a clear *t*, extending *li* and *an* into two separate syllables. “You sound exactly like an Australian I used to know. Only her voice was a little lower, a little less squeaky.”

Sarah picked up the bottle and turned towards the door. “Enjoy your smoke.”

“Her name was Cassandra Kerr, and she was a nursing sister. From Adelaide.”

“Oh.” Sarah paused. “I’m from Adelaide.”

“There you are then.” The woman stared evenly at her, her eyes opaque like polished coat buttons. “I’ve heard it’s a very pleasant place.”

“Oh, it’s alright.” Sarah shrugged. “If you like that kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing?”

“You know, peace and quiet.”

“Who doesn’t like that?” The sharp expression returned to the woman’s eyes.

“Well, you know...”

“Younger people, I suppose.” The woman took a drag on her charred cigarette and coughed. “Yes, I can see that. I imagine that was what brought Cassie to Singapore, a desire for a bit of excitement. She was that kind of person. Adventurous. Pass me that ashtray.” She gestured imperiously at the ashtray on Sarah’s table.

Sarah took a deep breath, sucking in air sour with smoke.

“Please.” The woman harrumphed; tears welled in her eyes. “Mine is full to bursting.”

Sarah put the bottle down on the table and picked up the ashtray; two steps took her to the edge of her balcony.

“Thank-you.” The woman balanced the tray on the concrete ridge and ground her cigarette into it as though stamping a seal. “I believe Cassie ended up living in a part of Adelaide called Belair.”

“That’s a nice area.” Sarah took a sip of her tangy drink. “Up in the hills.”

“She mentioned the hills in the letters she sent me. I think there was a large park near her house.”

“Belair National Park.”

“That might have been it. I’m not sure.”

“It would have been Belair Park. Trust me.”

“Well...” The woman shrugged dismissively as if she couldn’t be bothered to argue. “She told me about all the animals she’d seen on her walks there. Kangaroos and emus and little creatures called...” She paused, frowning. “*Possums*. Which sound delightful, the way she described them.”

“They’re pests, actually.”

“According to who?”

“According to the people whose roofs they get into.”

The woman looked unconvinced. “Well, I suppose that would explain why Cassie was so taken with her possums.” She disappeared behind the partition, reappearing a moment later with a fresh cigarette. “Cassandra Kerr was the patron saint of pests. Hence her fostering of me the whole time we were in Changi.”

Sarah stared at the woman. “You were in Changi? The prison camp?”

The woman inclined her head as she flicked open her Zippo, lighting her cigarette with a strangely youthful insouciance.

“Were you a member of women’s army group or something?”

The woman gave Sarah a withering look. “I was a schoolgirl. A *young* schoolgirl. And Cassie was a nurse who’d been at Alexandra Hospital before the war. We were civilian internees.”

“Oh, right. Right.” Sarah took a large slug of drink. “Sorry, I just didn’t realise...”

“There were women in Changi? Children? Civilians?”

“Any of the above, actually. Sorry.”

“We were something of a well-kept secret.” The woman propped her smoking hand against her bony chin. “They kept us in separate quarters from the soldiers. I think there was a fear the men might be spurred into action by the sight of women and children locked up. Provoked to strike their captors. And I imagine a few of them would have been provoked to strike me as well, if we’d been interned together. I was a little horror.”

“I’m sure you weren’t.” Sarah tried to sound convinced.

“Oh, I was, I was. Cassie called me her bad penny, because I was always turning up when she was trying to get things in order. Penny for short.” She massaged her throat; an arc of skin flapped like a sail beneath her chin. “Once when I was very ill, with beriberi - do you know what that is?”

Sarah shook her head.

“It’s a nasty thing you get when you haven’t had enough vitamins. Your flesh goes all mushy.”

“Oh.”

“You check for it by feeling your arms. If they feel a bit squishy you know you’re in trouble.” Penny stroked the underside of her leathery forearm; lumps of flesh appeared like mashed potato through gravy. “And I was in all sorts of trouble with it, I couldn’t stand up or anything. I ended up in the infirmary, which wasn’t an infirmary at all, it was a room in the prison that smelled, well, awful. Cassie did her best with it, though, she ran it like it was Charing Cross Hospital. Wouldn’t tolerate any nonsense.” She paused; her hand abstractly massaged flesh. “One day she brought me a tin of pineapple. It had been the Japanese Emperor’s birthday a few weeks before that, and the prison guards had given us all little tins of pineapple. Only I hadn’t enjoyed even my first helping of pineapple from the benevolent Emperor. I’d found it so sweet I’d felt ill eating it. I’d only finished my can because Mother made me, and I point blank refused to eat the extra chunks she tried to give me out of her ration. So, when I saw Cassie coming towards me with *another* can of pineapple, well...I nearly screamed the place down.”

Sarah watched the Bad Penny’s hand rise searchingly up her thin arm, her fingers probing her sleeve.

“But Cassie got that tin of pineapple into me, even though it took half the night for her to do it. She just kept coming back, each hour on the hour, to shovel more pineapple in. No sooner had I digested one load than she’d be back to administer the next. And I remember I cried, and I yelled at her, and called her mean and horrid, and told her I hated her. And that was just for starters. But she just sat there with a stern expression on her face, ignoring everything I said, force-feeding me one piece at a time.” Penny took a long lingering drag on her cigarette. “Do you know, it was only years later, long after the war had ended, that it occurred to me that she must have been harbouring that can for an emergency? I mean, food was so scarce, and fruit especially so. She must have been very tempted just to dismiss me as a little ingrate and eat the rest of that pineapple herself, but she didn’t. She gave it all to me, and I never thanked her, even though it probably saved my life.” Her mouth fell open around her cigarette as if she was trying to scorch her words with a fiery full stop. “I think I always meant to say something to her in person, when we met up again. I didn’t know how to put it in a letter.” She was silent; the cigarette smoked without her. “I was a



rotten correspondent, actually, for poor Cassie. She would send me these great epics the postman had to hand deliver, and my replies were the sort you send to your parents when you're at boarding school. Short and dutiful." She went to inhale on her smoke and jerked it away again as if trying to taunt herself. "I should have known she was unwell because the last letter I got from Cassie was just a card, sent last Christmas, saying how much she was looking forward to seeing me again. We were going to meet up in Singapore, at this memorial thing they've organised for us all. And then a few weeks later I got an email from her nephew saying she'd passed away after a sudden illness."

"Oh." Sarah could find no other response. "I'm so sorry."

"Well, she was past ninety. I suppose I just didn't see her as someone who would...Not Sister Kerr, no." The Bad Penny adjusted her grip on the burning cylinder. "Although, in a strange way, I've seen a lot more of her since she passed away. She's been visiting me quite regularly during the past few months, in my dreams at least." The ash formed a grey crook on her cigarette. "I dreamt about her last night, actually. She was taking a group of us out stargazing again in the yard at Changi."

"Stargazing?"

"She was absolutely mad on astronomy, quite the fanatic for it. She'd take us out each night before lights out and point out all the constellations." Penny looked over the balcony at the light-bleached horizon. "She wouldn't have much joy now, I'm afraid." She pointed at a patch of orange sky between the glowing goalposts of two skyscrapers. "But in the old days, if you'd looked in that direction, you'd have been able to see the Pole Star right on the horizon."

"The Pole Star as in the North Pole?"

"What other Pole is there?" Penny's eye flickered in a half-wink. "Yes, and that's the star sailors used to navigate their vessels with in the old days, according to Cassie. Apparently they'd never go below Singapore because the Pole Star dropped out of sight. So they believed they were nearing the end of the world and that if they went much further they'd sail right off the edge of the

earth.” She shook her head. “Amazing how I could see it so vividly, Sister Cassandra Kerr walking around the yard with her finger stuck up in the air, calling out the names of all the stars in that funny Australian brogue of hers. ‘*Look, ladies, there’s Orion! There, that’s Sirius!*’”

“Did it make you feel sad?” Sarah asked softly. “Seeing her again?”

“Oh, no. It was lovely.” The woman stared down at hands creased like crumpled paper. “With a bit of luck I might manage to nod off during the service and see her again. Only knowing my luck she’d turn up in a stern frame of mind and tell me to sit up straight and start paying attention.”

“Are you going to the Dawn Service?”

“With a heavy heart, yes.” Penny grimaced. “Ooh, I’ll definitely cop in from Cassie for saying that.”

“You don’t want to go to the service?”

“I just have a feeling it won’t be much like a service. These things seem to have become platforms for politicians seeking re-election. Men in expensive suits who utter a few lofty sentiments about the virtues of war and then tell us why it’s important we keep finding wars to fight.” She ground the cigarette into steel oblivion. “I was tempted not to go, you know. I thought, what’s the point? All that bugle playing and saluting and pontificating, it’s never had anything to do with Cassie or me or the other women in Changi. Nothing to do with any of us that got locked up, really.” She lifted the black shawl off the back of her chair and folded it over her arm. “But then I thought, no, damn it, I’ll go. I’ll go and I’ll observe the silence, and when they call for us to remember the fallen I’ll be remembering Cassie. If only to make amends for all the times I forgot about her.”

The distant clarion of a bus horn rose through the air.

Penny dangled over her balustrade. “Oh sod, that’s the bloody bus already!”

Sarah leaned over her own balcony. She could see a mini-bus parked by the side of the hotel, its white body luminous in the neon shallows.

“It’s not due here until five!”

Sarah glanced at her watch. “That’s what time it is now.”

The whites of the Bad Penny’s eyes flaring in the halogen light. “Oh, hell!” She bent over, dragging her leather shoes towards her. “You know what my husband’s done? He’s gone and bloody forgotten to set the alarm, hasn’t he?” She angled one stockinged foot halfway into her shoe. “All he had to do was set the alarm for half-four, that was one thing *he* was going to do, but no...” She rammed her other foot into her shoe. “No, he couldn’t even do that. And by the time I get him awake and myself presentable ... huh! We won’t make it.”

Sarah watched her shuffle along the balcony, her stocking heels hanging over the creased backs of her shoes, her arms swinging arrhythmically by her sides. She saw her mum setting off on a twilight walk, her shoulders squared in the dusk, her swollen legs kicking forward in a dogged march.

The bus honked again.

“Wait!” Sarah cried out to the vanishing form.

Penny halted abruptly.

“What can I do to help?” Sarah asked her.

“Well, do you think you might be able to hold the dawn back ten minutes?” Penny’s smile made her face look fragile, like a china bowl with a crack in it.

“No, but I can have a go with the bus.” Sarah hurried towards her room; moths were bouncing like burning paper scraps off the doorway light.

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The tour leader ran his pen down the column of names. His pen threw a shadow up the page like a sundial pronouncing noon. He clicked his tongue.

“We won’t go without them.” The leader’s female assistant smiled efficiently at Sarah. The pair was dressed in khaki uniforms badged with insignia declaring *Memorial World Tours*.

The man frowned. “Do you think they’ll be long?”

“Oh, no. I’m sure they’ll be down any moment.” Sarah looked through the glass doors at the tour bus in the driveway; its white chassis vibrated behind the dark planters like a yacht moored to iron posts.

“We won’t leave them behind. Not when they’ve come this far.” The assistant patted the leader lightly on his embroidered chest. “We’ll see if our driver knows a quicker route to the cemetery.”

The tour leader flipped on his officer’s cap as he followed his companion across the foyer. Sarah watched the foyer doors whoosh open. Momentarily she heard the thrum of the idling bus coupled with a radio bleating ‘*My Baby Takes the Morning Train*’. The glass doors shut on the discord with a sigh.

Sarah walked over to the foyer entrance; the doors half-opened again and then closed with a clunk when she failed to walk outside. Crossing her arms to protect herself from the chill, she stared through the plate-glass at the assembling passengers.

A small group was gathered beside the open front door: an extremely elderly man propped on a Zimmer frame and behind him, a woman in black clutching the hand of a small girl in blue. The girl was hopping slowly and deliberately over a crack between two flagstones; each leap made the woman’s arm twitch. The elderly man pivoted in front of the bus stairwell and raised his head

to survey the flight of steel steps. He lifted the frame and brought it down hard on the bottom step. There he stopped. The woman in black released the girl's hand to go to the old man's aid; the child, sensing her opportunity, began to hop away, but the woman spun around and caught her by the wrist. The driver motioned to the tour leader and the two men positioned themselves on either side of the veteran, each taking hold of a crooked arm and a metal leg. Inside the bus, a young man in a white naval uniform materialised at the top of the steps; leaning forward, he seized the veteran's shoulders with gloved hands. Sarah watched the men push and pull the elder up the stairs. She noticed the woman on the pavement biting her lip as she looked on. Behind her the small child had begun to hop slowly over the woman's shadow on the pavement.

Near the back of the bus Sarah saw the Major asleep in his seat, his mouth open like a Delphic oracle. *I hope he's seeing all of them*, she thought. *I hope all of those men he came to see are paying him a visit.*

Bradley was sitting behind the Major with his face pressed against the window, his cheek flat like a slice of processed chicken. He looked up as Carol's arm snaked over the back of the double seat she was sharing with the Major. Bradley glared at the packet of Kwells for a moment, then reached out and snatched it away. As he glanced back out the window he saw Sarah. She raised her hand slowly.

Bradley stood up and took in the congestion at the front of the bus. He slowly sat down again.

Sarah smiled and shrugged at him.

He mouthed, "I..." — pointing at himself, "will...see...you." Pointing at Sarah.

She nodded.

"I...will..." He made digging motions. "To you." He pointed at her again and gave her the thumbs up. "OK?"

She smiled and returned the gesture.

Bradley opened his mouth and snapped it shut on a half-formed word. After a moment he gave her the peace sign.

Sarah nodded as she returned the sign. *Peace be with you, Bradley.* She glanced at the Major. *And also with you, Major. And with you, Carol.* Her eyes rested on the elderly veteran now one step away from the top of the stairwell. *Peace be with you all.*

*And also with you, Sarah.* The response came from the landscape of a dream.

Sarah closed her eyes. When she opened them again she found herself staring at the small girl waiting to board the bus with her mother. The child was still hopping slowly back and forth across the pavement, taking care, with each leap, to avoid her mother's shadow.