The Book of Changes
A collection of short stories

By

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Submitted for the degree of M.Phil in Writing
University of Glamorgan
Supervisor: Sheenagh Pugh
July 2005
Length: approx. 52,000 words
# The Book of Changes

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Ruth Lacey
The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.

C.G. Jung
Influence
I.
No one ever told me where I'd come from, but it was clear from early on that my parents were not those who'd conceived and birthed me. I was tall, always, and as dark as the Greeks and Turks at school. My parents were as white as they come: blond and mousy brown and fragile looking, skin not made for this part of the world.

"Your mother died in childbirth," they told me, once they thought I'd understand.

"And my father, who was he?"

They couldn't tell me who they were, in those days they were not allowed to know. But I would sometimes hear my white white cousins or my aunts out in the garden whispering. "Look at her nose," they would say. "Look at her black black eyes and the way her lips turn in. She is, I'm sure of it," they would say, but 'it' was never given a name. No one ever said ‘part-Aborigine’.

I grew up in a North Shore home right out of House and Garden, it even had some Sydney Harbour views if you climbed the tree that edged over the back fence into the lane. After me, it turned out that my parents could conceive, it had probably just been the stress of wanting a child so much that stopped them up till then. So that in the end I was surrounded by brothers and sisters who couldn’t play too much out in the sun.

In the end, I grew up in a place I had to run away from, early on and fast as my long legs would go.

*

The forest in Borneo is thick as tangled hair. It glistens in the summer rain, even when the sun is only thin rays through the highest branches. Forest that they use to make their boats and houses from, planting a new tree for every one they fell, even if it takes a century to grow. That is what their ancestors did, and that is how they have wood, now, for houses as long as the Boorong vine, stretching the length of the river.
The tribes-people wear black tattoos and motorboat along the wide river to Kapit where it always rains. Kapit is a one-street town, with open restaurants on each of four street corners, musty breath of wet-through wood and earth and cooking.

I am waiting in one of the corner cafés for my guide. The forest people won’t accept me otherwise; it’s said that tallness frightens them.

“So you must be Miss Grace,” says a voice behind me. I look around to see a very wizened dwarf. He climbs up on a chair to shake my hand. “You going alone?”

“Yes,” I say. "Why wouldn’t I?"

“This forest very dangerous for woman alone.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

“My name Edward George the Third,” says the little man, with new respect.

“Great Grandfather Englishman,” he explains.

“Mine too,” I say.

Those bloody Englishmen fucked everything that moved.

My guru Maman has sent me here. “The forest people,” she said, when I asked where I should go. I had been in her ashram in India for two years, and I knew that it was time to move on. “Could you be more specific?” I’d asked her, but Maman believed her teachings could only be transferred through hugging.

The dwarf asks me for $20. “American,” he frowns when I hand him Australian.

“Thirty, then.”

We are stranded at the end of a long dirt track where a passing jeep has dropped us, and I reach into my pouch and pull out another note, despite the inflated exchange rate. He smells it, smiling. Ah, he says. I like Australian better. Lots of colours. Then he takes me round a bend. “Here’s the place,” he says, still smiling. Two hours later he has left me there.

In the evening, the young men bring their sacks of grain and spread them on the floorboards of the longhouse, its balcony stretching across the family rooms from end to end, the size of an Olympic pool. The sun is setting into the river’s mouth, it swallows the burning sky god whole; the women have come back from bathing, turning their heads shyly from my stare. As they return, the sun lowers its eyes from us, too, and the men begin a kind of dance, moving fast and barefoot over rice to split
the husks out from the grain. Soon, the grains are swept up into sacks, the floorboards cleaned, the families move into their tiny rooms for eating before the rice wine starts to flow.

In the day, the Iban women weave patterns on their cloth from messages that they receive in dreams. Their pictures will protect the tribe, like the carved totems that the young men make, birds’ heads on long sticks, the spirits of them entering into the person who carves their image.

There is almost no one I can talk to, just the headman – the one with the TV in his room – and the old woman who distils the rice for wine. She remembers the English, still. The others, they have forgotten, she says. They only know the new foreigner. I know the old.

Because of the old woman, I have remained their guest for longer than the one night they agreed upon with the midget. Foreigners are coming here again, says the old one. This time, only when they are invited.

The old woman makes me feel expectant, but she doesn’t tell me anything. I feel like she has something I need to know, a secret message I can take away with me if only I can work out the code.

I’ve started to get headaches since I’ve been here, small at first and hollow round my eyes. By the end of the first week, they’re blazing through to the back of my skull, and come in waves.

The old woman comes to feel my forehead.

“Smoking,” she laughs, touching me briefly and blowing her fingertips. “Sometimes pain is thing that moves you on,” she says, then walks away.

After three more days in the longhouse, I leave. Catch a small riverboat that’s going by, waving it down with a T-shirt. All the way along the giant river, my head keeps throbbing. I close my eyes and then open them up wide, but nothing seems to help me here. I feel like my head’s been shrunk and now it barely fits my brain.

By Saturday, I’m on the plane back to India, it’s the closest to a place where I belong. From Bombay I take a night bus down to Mysore because it’s the first one I see, and twelve hours later I find myself a room.

Mysore is mid-festival, which is why all the buses are going there. In the day, there are elephants and jugglers on parade, and rooftops crowded with spectators. At night,
the palace walls light up and small street stalls sell pappadams and rice inside banana leaves and peeled lychee.

Even after the end of the festival, I keep walking the streets here after midnight. I feel safe in a crowd, I search out where it’s going and I follow.

In the night I never want to sleep. I wonder how it is I got to be this empty. How I got to be in India wandering the nighttime streets with beggars, watching my clothes tear until I am like them. My mind becomes a deep and endless place for taking things in. My hands outstretched for anything that might come by.

Nighttime, I discover, is a place of power. Witches know that: lovers do. It’s when the mind gets taken over, reduced to its proper size. Letting all the other senses grow, until the walls and skin and me all disappear into the body temperature of the world.

One day in the streets, I meet a man. I wasn’t much interested in men, but this one had a friendly, wide face and a voice I trusted straight away.

“What are you doing here?” he said. He sounded Irish, though I might have been mistaken. “The festival’s over. All the whiteys and the elephants have gone home. Where are you from, anyway?”

I’d never been called white before and I didn’t know where I was from, just that it was almost dawn and I was out alone, lying on a bench under a stone pagoda. My saffron dress was black, and my long hair was torn and matted.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him, but he just laughed and took me to the place where he was staying, a large stone-floored room with a bathtub in it and two beds and a window so large you could see the lights on the Maharaja’s palace that no one had turned off, and the stone pagoda through a smaller window on the side.

He didn’t touch me at all, this man, just sometimes moved a steady hand under my elbow so I wouldn’t fall. Told me which bed I would sleep in, and in the morning brought me hot strong coffee and freshly squeezed juice.

“So who are you under all that muck?”

“I’m Grace.”

“Australian accent.”

“Hmm. And you are?”

“Drew. On my way to where you’re from,” and he pulled a crumpled poster from his bag. It was something that had been torn from a shop window, with bits of sticky
tape still on its edge. The writing had been torn as well, and all that was left to read
was Rainbow something, New South Wales. In the foreground was a young woman
with tanned, full breasts and a skirt tied at her waist. Behind her there were children
playing, and the smell of wildness and forest.

"Can I go with you?"

* 

For weeks I've been hitching up the coast of New South Wales with Drew, travelling
with my bathers in a bag in someone’s car boot, waiting for a chance to swim. There
is beach here all along, of course, but I am holding out.

When we stop, it’s in a place where air is clear. The trees have drunk up all the
carbon dioxide and gently sway together with my body. It’s got strong again just
getting here.

Rainbow Creek they call this little town that’s nestled in the forest, after the
rainbow serpent whose writhing body carved the hills and gorges, giving birth to all
the world.

For the first few days here, I stay with Drew, we sleep in a hostel that’s a barn, and
people sit around singing badly to acoustic guitars and pass round endless joints and
fantasise about how they want this place to be. All the time, they reminisce about
some festival it seems we’ve caught the tail end of, like a party that’s finished but
anyway they’re going to stay up all night and make it last. I’ve had dreams like that,
but then I have to open my eyes. Otherwise, where would I be?

Still hugging Maman, probably.

Drew’s a toker, but he doesn’t go in for all this singing stuff; the same songs
over and over and stuck sometime around Woodstock. "Hey, this was our Woodstock,
man," the people in the barn kept saying.

"This is really not what I imagined," Drew said, still clinging to the poster in his
bag.

Within a week, though, we’ve both found places to rent in town. My room is on
top of a café at the north end of town; Drew’s is further down the street.

Within a month, the café owner’s gone back to the city and left me the keys.
On the counter just as you come in the door is the place she put the keys down, and they have been there now for five days straight, unmov ed. I will not lift them, preferring to let the door bang open-shut and people wand er in to offer their suggestions.

"Hi, I'm Grace," I say as they pull open the wooden door that creaks on hinges, letting in the late afternoon rays.

"Where's Sally?" they ask, trying to decide if I will do instead.

"Gone back to Sydney," I say. "Left the keys," I tell them, letting my head sway over towards the place where the dust has left an imprint on the shiny black.

This must have been part of the town pub, once. Perhaps that's why the locals look at it with such suspicion as they move their thirsting bodies to next door, The Cat and Prey. In the pub the drinkers and the smokers cordon off their separate areas of the bar. Next to the toilets, you can do a quick deal with Mac, locally grown heads or kiff, he sits there by the table weighing up, and closing the sweet smell into airtight bags. By the bar, the local men gather in a concerted afternoon effort to swell their bellies. I try not to go in there.

"So, will you keep this place going?" asks a spindly man who has just appeared in the doorway of what was Sally's café.

"Sure," I say, uncertain.

"Then you'll need some things."

Sally left me lots of stuff that I'm not quite sure what to do with: chairs and tables, forks and knives and spoons and endless sky-blue serviettes. There's a coffee machine and glasses streaked with sediment and a bottle of Amaretto liqueur and 18 pounds of old bananas, straight off the tree in one bundle left rotting outside next to the toilet in the yard. Upstairs, there's a neat bedroom, double bed with no bedding, a chair from the café and a table. This is where I have spread my sleeping bag and set out the small store of things I had in my rucksack. There's plumbing upstairs - a tap and sink, and even an old bathtub on four legs - but I have to go out back unless I want to piss in it.

"Hello Grace," says a voice behind the skinny man, and Drew slides in through the doorway with a mop and broom and some roasted coffee beans. The thin man smiles and says "just a sec," and then disappears and comes back with a joint a mile long. "Just to get us started," he says, and soon the room is flooded, like the door was never closed and never would be. The floor boards and the walls are splashed with
water and paint and bright colours and people come in and play music and make coffee and go out again. Then someone brings a piece of wood and asks me what I’d like it to say.

There are times when everything you’ve ever done just feels like practice for some defining moment. That’s how I feel the day that I hang out the sign I’ve painted, rainbow oils straight onto a plank of wood. Grace’s Café. Swinging on two bits of rusty chain under the awning, like a doctor’s shingle.

II.

In the beginning, I used to drink hot milky chai and go to places that reminded me of India: bus stations and the outskirts of the big town next to Rainbow Creek, where aborigines still live in lean-to’s.

"Hey Gracie," they’d call to me, and at the start I couldn’t figure how they knew my name. The tracks out to their makeshift houses stuck in muddy clumps to my shoes, and I would feel like I was sinking into something deep.

"Seen youse in the baker shop," an old woman tells me. "Got that fancy café out somewhere, they says."

"Yeah, that’s right," I answer her, relieved. There are people say the Coories have an extra sense, they look at all the world like it’s alive and they can read the things it’s saying.

I come out to the slums of Fergusson to get that feeling. There are even cows that wander in the mud tracks someone calls a street. But then it is this place itself that draws me in, I start to forget the associations; like when you meet a woman or a man and at first it’s the reminding of someone else that pulls you in. Then that other person fades.

"Gracie, come in for a cuppa," the old woman says, her name is Agnes and I feel like maybe this is the forest – and the old woman – that Maman sent me to. I lift my feet out of the summer mud and let them fall again without any effort, the gravity lets the shoes slip off in the doorway to her home, and I pad inside across the scratched-up lino. She takes a copper kettle, filling it with water from a pump outside and placing it
onto the black fire-stove.

Out where I live, there's no lino floors, no plastic bags to put things in, no rubbish piling up outside for dogs to eat from. The dole is not a punishment. The dunny out the back and wood fires are romantic, not a chore you're dreaming to escape from.

I feel like Agnes knows me, she takes me in each week and I bring things for her grandchildren: some homemade cakes, and costume jewellery, so when I come now they all swarm around me.

One day I ask her.

"Knew your mum," she says, as if I knew it all along as well. "You got her look. You was the beatifullest baby ever been here, a little whitish, that's how half of them was, then."

"Who was my father?"

"Some cop from Fergusson. They picked her up for shoplifting, and took her to the lock-up. Real young, she was. Shoudda been at school."

I remember the first time I shoplifted, I must have been about my mother's age. I'd gone into a new store at the centre down the road, one of those big places, seemed like no one owned it. It was raining, and I didn't have an umbrella and no purse on me, so I just nicked in there for a minute, pretending to browse. Then I saw it: shiny teakwood handle with a small carved bird with blue around its eyes that hooked around your fingers, and then red and yellow spread out just like plumes.

The cop who they called in was nice, he took my hand and brought me right to my front door. My rich white parents smiled at him and my father offered him a Cuban-rolled cigar and they sent me up the wood and carpet stairs without my cream cake after dinner.

"You was lucky, took you to somebody's home, not out to that orphanage in Parramatta," Agnes says, spitting out the name like something dirty. Most of the half-castes who got taken away were not adopted, that's what Agnes says.

"Was my mother still alive?" I ask her.

"Sure she was. They all were."

"Poor Grace," I hear my mother say that night, her voice wafts up the stairs together
with the smell of fresh baking. She calls me that a lot, as if she’d saved my bones from something awful.

Afterwards my father comes up to my room. It’s late by now, and all the dishes have been clinked away and all the other children sleeping. "Your mother doesn’t agree," he says in low-whispering. "But I think you ought to be punished." And he takes off his wide leather belt with the silver on its buckle and I think he’s going to hit me. But that’s not what he does.

That night, I put everything that I need into a canvas bag with long wide straps and then I leave. I’m only fifteen and a half, but I am tall, and white-enough and north-shore spoken, I will pass for anything I choose. It’s four am and nearly dawn, I slip into the basement on my way out, opening the safe with the key that they keep on the picture frame, and I leave a note for my father where all the money had been. You got off easy, it said, and I take all of his Cuban cigars too, the ones that he called ‘pyramide’ in some fake accent, they’re tapered perfectly with ‘Montecristo’ written on the light brown paper ring.

That was the first time I felt the power. It didn’t have a name, yet, but I knew it, like a thing always inside of me and now it was let free.

One day Agnes takes me out into the forest behind Fergusson towards the coastland. The tracks are crusted mud, and they lead up and up until we’re both of us right out of breath. She points upwards, into the side of a ferned mountain to our left. "In there," she says, as if there’s anything to see but shrubbery.

We clamber up the rocks that have turned jagged and I don’t look down. Agnes is surprisingly agile. We turn a swift corner and then find we are standing on a giant ledge that stretches every way for miles; a hidden world.

"Here," she says, motioning me into a house-sized hollow skirting the edge of this rocky plain.

Agnes takes me into the rock cave, exactly at the time when sun streams in; you can see that every part of its surface has been patterned. She puts her rucksack down and starts to take things out of it: water, jars with ground dust that becomes colour when she adds water: ochre, and blood-red and blue, and then she starts to paint over the figures where their colour’s faded.

"What are you doing?" I cry out, suddenly the penny’s dropped. Agnes is desecrating ancient art.
This is the cave that Agnes' ancestors painted, and her family's meant to keep. "It's how we keep the spirits of them living," she tells me later. While she's retracing the lines she doesn't speak to me at all, she's in some kind of trance.

"The men is s'posed to do it, but they all bloody drunk and petrol heads," she says.

"Want me to getcha later, or you hitching?" Agnes asks the next time that she takes me somewhere. I look around at the place she's left me: a dirt road that edges the forest, doesn't look especially travelled. "I'll take my chances," I call out, but Agnes says she'll come by later anyway and check it out.

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask her again as she restarts the engine, so that her answer seems haphazard and by the way. "You walk about until it finds you," is all she says.

So here I am. I walk with my eyes closed until I find a place I feel like stopping, then I leave the track and venture in. I have to walk carefully here, avoiding creek beds and slippery stones, and trees and ferns so close together in some parts I have to find a way around them. A clearing opens up, with fresh water that gurgles past. I stop and take my food out.

I don't know what will happen next or what's supposed to. I'm sitting with my eyes closed on a mossy rock under a tree, its leaves spread out so high above me I can only guess at what their shape is from the ones that have fallen.

Then, suddenly, something rushes through me. I am fifteen again, and being pulled from my belly by something soft but insistent.

A small, bright coloured bird has landed near my right hand, looking straight up with its eyes fixed, into mine. Around them there are rings of azure blue.

After that, I start to feel things. I touch the trees and animals and rocks; I listen. When I walk out of the forest again, it is sunset, and Agnes is waiting for me on the dirt track where I finally emerge.

"She found you," Agnes smiles.

"You knew what it was, didn’t you?"

Agnes nods.

"How?"

I look at her as if she has been hiding some special secret. A power I don't understand.
"Your mum told me," she says. "She was out here, in this place when she was pregnant. Said she saw the blue bird come and sit right by her. Said its spirit came into you, then."

There are times when everything you’ve ever done just feels like practice for some defining moment. Agnes tries to talk to me about the Dreaming, but I don’t think I’ll ever understand. I can only see the shadows of the things she’s saying, mixed in with the things I knew before. I know that underneath the words there is another world, like the rocky plain that’s hidden in the mountains, but I lost the way before I got to ever know it.

"It’s better that way, love. You like a...translator," she says, smiling as she catches the right word. "That’s all we doin’ anyway. Read the signs and tellin’ what we think they mean."
Spring, 1973. My father scrunches up his nose when I tell him, I can suddenly see all the lines on his face like he’s put on ten years.

“I’ve quit my job,” I say to him. Scrunch.

The greying hair is thick and curves away in one sweep from his brow. His glasses, bottle-black that he can’t see without, are lifted almost off his face. My father’s eyebrows have thickened, too, over the last few years, with wayward strands that catch you unawares.

“So what are you going to do?” he asks slowly, trying not to let the heavy accent show his disappointment.

“Write,” I say, careful to stop myself before adding ‘poetry’.

“But what will you write if you’re not doing anything?”

My mother is sitting at the table, too. It’s outside in the courtyard, set for three and overflowing with New Year treats: honeycomb and blueberries for sweetness, and apples from the backyard trees. My mother has become fat over the years, but you can’t tell from the way she moves her body, swinging it like she’s swallowing all the room in the garden.

I sit, crowding myself on the white wrought-iron chair, careful I don’t take up too much space.

“You sound just like a woman of sixty,” she tells me, pushing sixty herself, so she should know. “So what do you really want to do?” she asks now, leaning forward so that her breasts almost knock the jug of cream between us.

I clench my teeth and try my hardest not to let her see me cry. “I told you,” I said.

“Oh, Amanda. Mandyshirn,” she says, I am grateful, at least, that she leans back now. “Can’t you talk to me about it? I never see you. I just want to talk.”

All my mother ever did was talk. It’s as if we were always missing each other’s messages, saying all the things the other didn’t want to hear.

“When you were a baby, only Aaron could stop you crying,” she would say, over and over again as if someone close to her had died.
"Oh Gretta," my father would comfort her in Yiddish, whispering words like a
bird’s sad song, until she pushed them out of range with a shrugging movement of her
hand.

"So how is our Jesse?" they ask me now in unison, recomposing themselves. At
least I’m married. At least he’s Jewish.

"He’s fine. We’re moving on the weekend. That’s what I came to tell you," I say,
in between mouthfuls of summer wine that’s making me dizzy, so that Aaron and
Gretta have become a single monster with two heads. “We’ve bought a farm near the
northern coast.”

“A farm?” the monster cries out, spewing smallish bits of apple, honeycomb and

I smile now, the width of it enough to cover everything. I don’t even have to
answer. I’ve shot the golden arrow, and the monster’s in its dying throes.

For a moment, I feel powerful, taller than I am: a large-breasted Deborah with
her sharp sword dripping fresh day’s blood.

*  

If it weren’t for Drew, I know I would die here. The steam shrinks me down and my
clothes are always damp with the earth’s sweaty smell.

In the summer, it rains. You’ve never seen rain until you’ve been here, huge
globules the size of a hand, bursting into green when they hit the soil.

Everything grows, this is a place of fertility, and flowering and decay.
Deconstruction, Jesse says. Insects love the place, they make their homes in fallen
pieces of wattle and daub, under the canopy of ferns that barely lets sun get through.

We must have been stoned the day we moved out here, packed up our city life and put
all our savings in with a bunch of hippies.

“IT’s only twenty miles from the beach,” Jesse had said, he sounded like a
holiday pamphlet, standing on the hill we were calling home.

“If we’re so close, why can’t we just go there?” I asked, I had a different picture
of where we’d be, as if I already knew that place where the air is filled with waves. As
if I’d seen it: the blue that plunges itself between mountain peaks, there is water
everywhere, splashing, raging, it climbs into our rooms in the night through torn flyscreens with the wind.

"Sometimes places are more important than people," I said in my smallest voice, and he smiled at me, slinging his arm over my shoulder just as it started to rain.

"You can’t buy the beach," he said, grinning like a wayward child, pulling wet strands from my face. “This’ll be perfect. You’ll see.”

Our house is made of wood. Termites share it, that’s what Jesse has surmised after hours of prying carefully beneath floor boards. I ask him why he wants to know, there is no cure, but knowing is what’s important, he says.

The house is hot in summer, and rain drips into the sitting room from the roof. Some days, we just get stoned and count the droplets, watching them from tired beginnings, slowly like a piece of waterfall, until they meet their journey’s end on the towel we’ve placed by the door.

Outside, there is untamed bushland up till the neighbour’s fence shrouded in vines that keep climbing, as if they are stretching to heaven, turning back at fence’s end to re-route. Passionfruits drip from them, honey coloured, thick and full of seed, we suck them from holes that we push with our fingers, feeling the jelly pieces sliding down like liquid gold.

In the winter, there is no heating, only a small wood fire which we can’t leave to burn in the night. Jess complains, he says that the house is so waterlogged it cannot catch fire, but city sense doesn’t ever desert me.

After the rains it is beautiful, those first hours when you smell the earth vibrating with new life, the steam that comes off it, the light on wet leaves. Spiders webs glisten, and the tips of wild grass shimmer in the wind.

After the rain is the wind, I pull my coat over me and brace the cold, step out over the narrow verandah and start to walk. Mud and leeches cling to my boots, I cross the dirt road past our houses and follow the path we have trodden out to the lake and start to walk towards town. It will be days before we get our car out past all that mud, and I’ve taken a backpack for supplies, the small important things we can’t stock up on: milk, bread, potatoes, fish. Chocolate. Anything that needs a fridge.

I love it when I go into town, it has something magnetic in its air. This is when I start to feel connected again, gathering in the small painted cafe with thick, strong coffee.
ground real fine, it's like manna. Grace's homemade lentil pies, and someone else's homegrown. I breathe a sigh of relief as the cafe swells with after-rain life, gathering in its exiles from the soggy fields.

Walking the streets here, even when I'm straight, even before Grace's café, makes me high. Perhaps it's the mixture of wafting smells: wet soil and dope and incense, and bright, tropical colours like I've never seen, even the people who come here have changed their natural hue. People smile as if they know, somehow, who you really are. There is that quality here of seeing past surfaces. If we are here – and we have all chosen this place – then there is a barrier already down, a tacit understanding between us of why we came into this part of the world at this time, and of what we have left behind. So that even now, right at the start of the journey while we are still strangers, there is a feeling of community.

Years ago, this place was dying, just another bunch of country towns. No one who wasn't born here had discovered it: hot and wet, too far from the sea. Full with red-necks and mozzies and one-street towns and land too hilly to farm.

I suppose that was why they allowed us in. They didn't think – or maybe they did, maybe they knew even then that we'd bring our drugs and our politics and our secret disgust at their small-town ways and heave this place kicking into another century; saving them from themselves.

Grace brings me a double espresso she's made from imported coffee beans and rolls a joint. She's tall and lithe like an Indian, long black shiny hair and she smells of patchouli and sandalwood from her beads. A record of native flutes is on the player, interspersed with Led Zeppelin and Joan Baez; it's a mood place and we all go by Grace's mood.

Grace sketches and I write poetry. Her drawings are like her name and the way she moves. She is enigmatic and beautiful and makes men afraid. I am grateful to have a friend.

Grace's carpet feels like home: over the cafe she's set up her room, and I'm staying here. Coming to town is such a trek this time of year, and Jess doesn't expect me back for a couple of days.

It's been a long day and I'm happy to sink into soft pillows and get more stoned, and stretch out my body when the right music comes on. Grace's is open again after an afternoon lull; she believes in siestas, breaking with local tradition and importing

Ruth Lacey
her heathen ways, no one knows where she is really from. Somewhere in the
Caribbean, I think, I haven’t asked her yet, it’s always felt unimportant at the time.

I don’t really know where anyone is from, here, it’s as if we’ve wiped out our
past lives, like nineteenth century pioneers, or street children.

I lie on the rug some more, regretting the excess of dope that I’ve smoked. It’s
early, still, and I’m unlikely to make it through the evening. I put a kettle on the stove,
then think again. Downstairs is the only decent coffee in this town.

I start down the stairs, but after a few steps I find my legs resisting my brain.
And then something else stops me, too, it’s as if I have sensed him with my body
before I have seen him.

Drew is sitting at one of the tables. He lifts his head and smiles at me, perhaps at
my hesitation, my shock at seeing him again.

I go to sit with him, he hasn’t said anything but no one else is here and I just find
myself sliding into the hard, wooden chair beside him. “Grace, I’m dying for a
coffee,” I call out behind me. “What was that stuff?”

“Best heads in the country,” she smiles, the grass here is famous, named after the
town, something in the soil must boost its potency, and I haven’t adapted yet.

I look across at Drew and can’t think what to say. It seems like whatever my
opening line is will determine the rest of our lives, like the opening sentence of a
novel. Anna Karenina, for instance: All happy families are alike. Unhappy families
suffer each in their own way, or something like that, anyway it’s translated badly from
the Russian.

I tell Drew about Anna Karenina, it just comes out while I’m thinking it, and
then “What about your family?” I say, not thinking at all.

“I thought we didn’t talk about that here,” he says, like I’ve broken some taboo,
except he keeps smiling, like the world were some joke only he was getting, and
maybe he’d let me in, a bit, if I really tried.

“I do,” I say. “Well, look, I’ll tell you about mine,” I offer, I’m not letting this
one by me, he seems like a man who gets let off too easy because of that charming,
hearty thing he has about him. And those green-brown eyes like the color of foliage,
“You could camouflage yourself with those eyes,” I say into the moment’s silence,
before I can censor it.

“Home grown truth serum,” he says, and then, “hey look, why don’t we just fuck
first.”
“First before what?” I’m laughing right at him, now, but he’s woken me up better than any coffee beans.

“I mean, that’s what we’re getting at, isn’t it?” he says, and he pauses and I don’t say no. “And then later, all this tension will be gone and we’ll know what to say to each other. And you can ask me about where I got all my scars.”

“I like to know that before,” I say. “And anyway, I quite like tension.”

“Come to my room,” he says.

We pay Grace, each of us separately, signing our names on the register. I like his name. Andrew O’Connolly, he scribbles it with the ‘O’ really large, that must mean something to people who know.

The bed in his room is small, we don’t fit, and the room smells of cigarette smoke. He kisses me, but my mouth is dry, I’m so tired and stoned and hyped up with coffee I just want it over with.

If it were up to me, this would still be the night before, and I would be safe in his arms, not knowing. Morning, I would wake to his body, soft and downy next to me, and the room would be new, then, and we would be, wordless and slow at the start, joined already in dreams.

“I’m sorry,” I say to him, he’s been making all the right moves, but I can’t anymore and he stops and pulls me to him. He has arms like a bear, they’re tight and hairy, winding around me almost twice.

“I wasn’t listening,” he says, there’s a sadness in his voice that I haven’t heard, yet; that later I’d be used to. Drew hurt, like the teeth of a hunter’s trap have closed down on him.

That night, I limped back to Grace’s like I was carrying Drew’s injury, she looked at me sideways from behind the counter and I heaved myself upstairs like something heavy was pulling me down. Some thing I would have to dig for and find and be delivered from.

I run a bath and dollop masses of almond butter out of the glass container on its ledge, like a protective layer, and steep myself in the rose-coloured light that comes in past the door.

"What am I going to do?" I ask Grace when she comes in, I don’t know why I’m asking her, only that she seems to know things I can only guess at.
"Here," she says, handing me a big black book with Chinese letters on the cover, sticky-taped at the edges and white-lined with wear. I Ching or Book of Changes it says, With a Foreword by C.G. Jung.

She takes three old coins that have square holes in the middle, bronzed and rough on one side with two characters.

"Throw them," she says to me.

"What?"

"Throw them on the ground. All three. I'll read them."

I do what she says.

"Six times," she whispers, trying not to break my concentration, scribbling in a notebook at the end of every throw.

Hmmm, she says after I've finished, looking up the answer in a table she's stuck in with staples.

"Joyousness," she reads aloud.

"What?" I say again.

"Joyousness means pleasure," she starts off reading, black book in her hands like it's a bible. "Its stage of change is metal. The cutting and destroying quality is the other side of its meaning."

I'm too tired to ask her what that means or why some random page of an ancient book has anything to do with me.

"Every change comes out of a decision," Grace tells me. She's stopped reading now. "When you grasp the essence of a situation you'll know what to do."

"I can read auras too," she says.

Grace can see auras. She can see the way energies interact.

"Like you and that guy," she says, next morning, opening the high painted windows onto her forest view. My head hurts, still, from too many cigarettes. My stomach churns. Grace brings me juice. "Ginger, celery, carrot," she says breezily. "It stimulates the blood. Clears out toxins."

"Tastes like shit."

"So," she says, expectantly, like I'm her new best friend.

"Look," I say. "I have to tell Jesse first."
I wish, sometimes, that everything didn’t affect me as much as it does. I change with the weather, the smell of almonds, the way people pass me in the street. It’s as if I have no outer shell and every bit of lint and crap can get in.

Grace says that people like me are special. Sometimes she watches me from across the cafe, the way that my colours change. It’s raining again, and I’m staying here for a couple of days, sent out word to Jesse about when I’ll be home again, I feel like I need the time to reassemble myself. “You look a little shattered,” Grace says.

In the mornings I do yoga in the room with all the carpets and the hanging plants, looking out over the forest view, hearing the rain, it’s like an orchestra, white noise filtering out pain. I need to heal from something, I can’t even say what it is. I sleep a lot. In the afternoons I help out in the cafe, that’s the best time, smoke a little, taking the edge off.

Drew doesn’t come in again, I’m not even sure that I want to see him, but I know that I can’t go home, yet; that once I see Jesse I’ll have to tell him, and then everything will change. Every day that I wake up hearing rain I am thankful.

In the evenings, Grace tries to show me how to see energy fields, she says that everyone can. I close my eyes and try to picture points of light, empty my body and my head, “now look at me without blinking,” she says, until I am dizzy and start to hallucinate, and then I think that maybe I see a small haze of green. “Green?” she asks, as if it isn’t the color she’d like to be.

I’m doubtful about all this, but I start to feel good, strengthening some part of me that makes its own protective field. I start to think differently about Drew, too, flashes of sensation that slowly are making me want more.

I go outside and feel the raindrops warm on my skin, I am radiating heat. Faces smile at me in the street as if I belong here.

“Hey, it’s you,” comes a voice beside me. I stop. It’s raining hard, suddenly, as if the sky had just seen us and opened up with everything its got. I look around and see that I’ve walked up past Drew’s, I’m right outside it, “I didn’t mean to come here,” I start to say, but he stops me before I get to explain anything. “It’s cold, come on in and get dry.”

I like the way he acts as though we’re friends, as if he knows me. “There’s a towel in the bottom cupboard,” he calls out while I take a shower, “and you can take a shirt from on top of the drawer. I’m making tea.”
“Scummy place, eh,” he says later, looking around with a kind of pride. I shrug in agreement. The bathroom smells of mildew, everything does here if you’re not meticulous, and it wafts through everywhere. “I’m usually too drunk or stoned to notice,” he says. “Here, have some, it’ll warm you up,” and he passes me a joint and some hot brandy tea.

This is what I tell Jesse: I had sex with this man.

What happened? He says.

I tell him. That man we met in town, once. Remember? I saw him in the cafe. That one on the main street that Grace runs, you know, the tall dark one.

What happened? He says.

How much do you want to know? I ask him.

Everything.

It’s a bit like being on trial, telling Jess. He isn’t doing it to humiliate me, or even devalue what happened. It’s just how he is. Knowing things, knowing everything, all the details, helps him somehow.

We sit opposite each other on straight-backed chairs. He doesn’t show much emotion, just flickers of anger now and then, like I’ve broken some rule that doesn’t even exist. We don’t have rules like that between us. Up till now we never have.

“I don’t really want to live like this, you know,” he says.

“ I know that.”

“But I will.”

It’s weeks before I go into town again. The rain is slowing, we spend our days mending the house and painting it, planting the garden, meeting with neighbours, making plans. It’s the start of spring and everything grows, and I’m pregnant, too, it’s as though I have melted into some natural flow and I burst with the feel of small life pushing itself into being inside me.

I think it’s the closest thing I have ever known to being whole, this joining with another human being.

When I go into town, now, I take the car. I’m feeling robust, but Jess won’t let me walk, he’s become so protective, he is constantly amazed by me: the way my body
changes shape and my belly grows taut and round. “Like a goddess,” he keeps saying, like this is how he’s always wanted me to be.

“Barefoot and pregnant,” says Drew when he sees me, months have passed by now, it’s the end of spring and I’ve pulled out my big summer dresses and I don’t wear shoes.

“If you were mine, I’d want to keep you like that. There’s nothing so beautiful as a pregnant woman. Come here,” and I just shut up, I don’t say anything, not about how I belong to only me, not about the months that have passed in between, I just walk straight to him and feel the heat of his hand on my child.

“Will you come with me?” he says.

Then, it didn’t seem different to any other time. Drew and this child inside of me, together, the hot flow of him, the way he carried this heat and it seemed to invade me.

“If I were married to you this wouldn’t happen,” he says to me later, holding my body in his, there’s a sadness to his lilt, as if I’ve betrayed him.

“Yes it would,” I whisper softly, stroking his hand, brushing back the hairs on his arm with my fingers. “It’s how I am.”

“What is it you want me for?” he says to me then, and I stop for what seems too long, like I’m thinking of the answer that will keep him here, so he won’t go away.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Just stay with me.”

I like the rawness of what he does to me, the way I am cut and healed and laid out bare. When I pull him close I think only of me, of needing to know what will happen, which parts he will touch in me.

I take shape when he looks at me, it’s something different from anything I’ve known.

We are on the bed, it’s always been too small. “Why don’t you get something larger?” I ask him, but he says he’d get lost in all that space, alone. “When you’re here, I can wrap you up in me,” he says. “There’s nowhere to go.”

It’s true. It is like that. Jesse, when he sleeps, won’t let me touch him. He takes himself to his side of the bed, next to the table with his glasses on it, a book, a reading lamp. A pen and paper for when he wakes, sometimes the night with some new idea. That’s how we will get rich one day, I suppose.
Drew will never be rich. He wants the things that he’ll never have: a wife, a house, money, he doesn’t know how to go about getting them, not the first thing.

It makes me feel safe. Like he’ll always be there, there’ll never be anywhere else for him to go, just this room and me and the other women who come by sometimes but I don’t mind them. They don’t bother me.

Jesse’s women don’t bother me, either, perhaps that’s why I expect that Drew won’t bother him.

“It isn’t the same,” he says, and that’s when he looks like he’s going to break, just for a moment until he gets his composure, he looks small and wiry, then, and it makes me want to cry.

I stand outside, it’s summer rain, I feel the way my dress clings to me like a second skin and I pull it off, I try to, but the rain has smoothed it on like glue.

Jesse and Grace are under the ceiling fan on the balcony. No wind. It feels as if the earth has stood still for us, holding its breath until this new piece of life is able to emerge. “Come on,” it whispers quietly. “This world is not so complicated as it seems.”

I breathe. “Just breathe,” Jesse says, it’s the answer to everything, there’s nothing else that you have to do. Giving birth is an exercise in letting go, trusting your body; all the things that I barely know how to do.

“Fall into the pain,” says Grace, as if she knows, but there is no one else to listen to, just her and Jess, so I obey. She’s brought her oils and her music and Jesse sits at my feet, holding them like they are his children, now.

“The doctor’s coming,” he whispers; Jesse knows. All the essential oils in the world won’t calm me down.

“There was this woman who had her baby in a bath,” Grace had been telling me, she’s full of birth stories, lately, and friends keep pulling out photos, I have to beg to keep them away. “No camera,” I say to Jess. “Later, when it’s born.”

People love telling their birth stories, but I don’t, not that I suffered terribly, just that no one really wants to know and anyway, the details never come to grips with what happened, the feeling that nothing will ever be the same. As if you have crossed some Rubicon but you don’t know it, yet, you just feel somehow that you’re on the other side.
It’s still the seventies and we’re still in the rainforest house and nothing in the world has changed. I am a mother, now, but I haven’t stopped long enough to despise it, yet, this milestone on the way to getting old. One day, I will wake up and find myself married, in a way I haven’t been till now, washing nappies, playing with kids on the lawn. And my body will feel flattened even though it hasn’t changed and I will stop, one day, and find myself crying for what I’ve never become.

I see him in the market, Marilyn strapped to my back, she goes with me everywhere like an extra piece of luggage; like a new, soft breath. Everywhere I am, now, I feel her sweetness, warm at the back of my neck, her small hands touching my hair, deep voice husky and musical like she is singing.

“She’s got beautiful eyes,” says the voice, just the same, as if we are still in that room, and he looks the same, too. When we get to the room, I put the baby down on a rug and he takes my small, dark hands in his furry grip and he won’t let go, but we don’t move and we don’t say anything. And Marilyn just watches us, green eyes that take up all her face, and I wonder what they must see.

I wonder how it is that I am a mother when I feel so much like a child, there is something so needy in me it gives me physical pain, and I let go of the hands that somehow, sometimes warm me and I take the child in my arms to feel her again.

I don’t ask any questions, all I care about now is being here. I never see past the moment with him, as if our lives are just a disjointed string of them, places where we can rest, perhaps, and slip into our skin.

Maybe that’s why it’s always so hard to leave. “You’d better go,” he says, it’s getting dark, the sun sets right through the curtains turning everything pink with threadbare light. I have fed the baby and eaten and slept, it’s like coming home, and I know that when I leave, this place and this person will disappear, the way a parent does to a baby child, so that I don’t know when I will see him again. Or if I will.

When I leave Drew this time I don’t go back down the forest road where I belong. Something turns the wheel of the old Valiant down the other way, out past the farms and the smalltime towns, until I am at the sea.

I take Marilyn and shield her with my body from the wind and I know I am home, now.
Later, they will come here, to this place where the air is filled with waves, and my life will not be the way I imagined it.

“Sometimes places are more important than people,” I will say to them, but no one, not even me, will quite know what I mean.
The Unexpected
It was a Saturday night and I was fifteen and I had this blue seersucker dress.

I was fifteen but I knew that when all my other sources had evaporated, when I knew it was a hit I wanted, I put on the dress. I don't remember where it was from or why I had it, and it probably didn't make me look better than other dresses did. I was fifteen and I had no idea of how much power I had, only an inkling. Only the slightest edge of an idea. But when I put that dress on I felt it, it transformed me into someone I needed to be.

It was a Saturday and all day we'd been hanging out at the steps on the beach, just under the gelato shop with the hot chips they put too much salt on. By lunchtime people had to walk around us, or take one of the narrow paths that dipped down from the promenade to the hot sand. That summer, we owned the steps next to the lifeguard tower, wide enough to sit on, and always opposite the flags.

That day I had on my new string bikini, crocheted blue and white with lining, and when I looked at myself in the dressing-room mirrors my thighs looked too big for my body and I rushed to pull a towel around my hips. In the mirror was a plain, freckle-faced girl whose nose was peeling from the sun, and her hair had turned a kind of honey-blonde.

It was a hot night, a Sydney summer night and I was in the dress I had hung up in my great-grandmother's wardrobe because in summer I would go stay with my grandparents and have her room. She died when I was seven, and my grandparents had not removed her things, and so I would sleep my summer nights in her old bed and hang my clothes in among hers. Everything in that room smelt of Eau-de-cologne, the kind that grandmothers or aunties used, and it reminded you of their kindness.

"Do you want something to eat?" my grandmother called out that night and the budgerigar said "something to eat? Something to eat?" and my grandfather looked at me and said "you are so beautiful. The stars will be jealous." We went out in his olive-green Valiant and he dropped me off outside the house with the music wafting through the open windows to the summer street and kissed me on the forehead like he always did.
That night, it was a Saturday and I was fifteen, I felt that every boy in the room could see me. Sometimes then, and even now, I feel invisible. Like my body is just this thing that gets me places, but then I knew, maybe for the first time. That it had other powers. Boys wanted to dance with me and touch my hair and hold onto my waist when there were slow songs, and one boy with long hair and torn jeans took me out onto the back porch and offered me a joint and I took a drag. Then he tucked my hair behind my ear and kissed me on the neck and I saw he had the darkest eyes in the world and I wanted badly to know where they led.

Girls didn’t lose their virginity at fifteen in those days, and not at parties. Not the girls I knew. The boy in the torn jeans smelt like smoke when he kissed me on the mouth and touched my breasts and stopped to breathe into my ear. "I’ve got my bike outside," his hot breath told me, "we could go somewhere," and I said sure, I told my grandparents I’d get a lift home.

People watched us as we left the party, the Beatles were playing Ticket to Ride, I still remember all the words, and stepping over people kissing on the floor. The house was on Military Road on the harbour side, with a wall made of sandstone bricks, and the boy had a motorbike and he let me wear his helmet.

I had met the boy before, so I wasn’t scared and I was sure I wasn’t being stupid. I had never been on the back of a motorbike or smoked grass or kissed a boy who smoked cigarettes, but after that Saturday, a lot of things about the world would change.

We stopped at the beach, it was a short ride but I felt like I had always been there on that leather seat, with my arms around the boy who smelt of cigarettes. He took the helmet off my head so gently that it felt like love.

Boys then, when I was fifteen, didn’t think that you would sleep with them, they were pretty sure you wouldn’t go down on them either. I was waiting for someone who would know how to touch me, and then this boy with the darkest eyes had come along, I had known he would, it was because of the dress, because of how I was inside it.

We lay down on the sand and the boy kissed me, and pulled me to him hard and touched my body through the dress. I didn’t have to say anything. He left his leather jacket on and touched me through my clothes, as if the dress was part of me.
Tina always looked liked she’d walked off a magazine cover: full lips slightly parted, pouting, when she paused to speak. Untamed hair that went everywhere, too much of it, there was too much of all of her, dark flesh and inviting eyes so that you could imagine how she’d look if you could only see under that short, grey school skirt.

At school we all wore uniforms, but none of us wore them like Tina. Her shirts never bulged or strained; no cleavages, no buttons popped so that boys from Longbush High could see her bra. Tina’s clothes suggested things that other teenage girls could not quite grasp, materials we’d never seen; the way they fell in simple lines across her breasts, the mini skirt was longer, but it showed more thigh.

Tina wasn’t beautiful, no model’s figure or face, but you wanted to touch her, to know first hand how that skin felt, even the other girls vied with each other to get close. Feel the way that heat came off her, perhaps some of it brushed off the way charcoal does on your hands; perhaps the boys would look at us, too, with the same glint in their eyes, reserved usually for those women in magazines.

I wasn’t attracted to Tina in the way that schoolgirls are. It was something more vicarious, the way her vitality bounced off mine. How she knew everything through skin, a kind of primitive knowing I had lost at an early age; the way that her mind was thrown by it, so she clung onto mine.

Our clinging was almost physical, my white freckled skin and green eyes, black hair, just enough flesh so you could feel the outline of breasts, thighs, hips where they were supposed to be. I moved fast, talked fast, I was like lightning she told me. I burned.

She smouldered.

Tina. She had an effect on men that I never envied; feeling it through her was as close as I wanted to get. There was something terrifying about how she courted the edge, the veiled promise, the dark power of fantasy that she left in her wake.

My father would refuse to drive her home alone, I had never seen him like that before, and I didn’t like to, although I was intrigued. So I always went along for the ride. I sat in the back while my father lost his way between suburbs, crossing the
imaginary line that demarcated the old immigrants from the new, till we’d get to the building next to the railway track: she was the only person I knew who lived in a flat.

Tina’s parents were Greek, but she’d changed her name, shortened it and told everyone that she came from some island in the Aegean Sea. “King Aegeas threw himself off a cliff there, melting into the ocean,” she would tell us in hushed tones during class. Letting us into her own myth, a secret underworld, you could hear the sea lapping over pure white sand beneath treacherous cliffs.

In her fourth floor apartment, though, you would never know that the Greeks had invented mythology: her mother wore stiff shirts with wide collars and polyester pants that showed her cellulite; she was always tired. Her father was small and tough, sunbaked skin and wiry muscles, eyes too close together, greying hair. On the walls they had nailed up oil paintings of sunrises, gaudy pinks and oranges and blues. Green and white-streaked lino covered the floors, polished clean, smelling of disinfectant: her parents worked nights as office cleaners. Perhaps that’s why they never knew where she went.

Only the Greeks in the neighbourhood had left the lino on the floor, perhaps they had even invented it, anyone who bought their houses had to pull it up, polishing hidden floorboards that were impossible to keep clean. Tearing off wallpaper with birds and flowers and abstract patterns that didn’t match in the corners, pasting up paisley prints in velvet plush you could feel with your hands.

Summer afternoons, Tina and I would skip class, go out past the softball fields to the bushland that hid surreptitiously next to the road. Tina called them Indian Summers. She wore cheesecloth shirts that billowed softly when there was a breeze. “In India, the summers never end,” she’d say wistfully, knowing that changes in weather meant changes in clothes, pullovers hanging shapelessly and dark blue slacks, feet pushed angrily into leather shoes. In the bushes behind the school she smoked cigarettes, Gauloises because of the name, it rolled off her tongue like butterscotch, taking on a meaning it never had. I didn’t smoke.

Summer afternoons were the times that she told me things. “Pedro came to the bar last night,” she’d say breathlessly, her latest fascination. She put on her new Cardin dress for him, cost her a year of waitressing, it was stunning and bare and she painted her lips in scarlet, “just like O’Hara,” she said.

“He asked me if I’d go with him to his flat over a Spanish restaurant in town,”
she says, and her heart is pounding just from saying it. “He has sea-green eyes. His
chest is like marble. He has a beard. He looks like a Toreador.” But Tina’s stories
never get past the seduction: they look at each other, his hand brushes past her creamy
breasts, just lifting the Cardin bodice tied with string. They dance to Salsa, I’ve never
even heard of it; his lips touch her neck. She never leaves the bar.

The men know that now, she says, though they’re finding it difficult to accept.
“He told me he gets hard just from seeing me. He pulled me close so I could feel it,”
she says, her lips are quivering.

“Did you tell him how old you are?”

Tina’s stories make me feel protective, in my world you don’t actually sleep with
anyone until you’re eighteen. “You could get raped, Tina,” I tell her. “Can I meet
him?” I ask.

“Hey Jermaine, what ever happened to that Barry guy?” she asks, and I tell her
about the disco at the beach and the walk on the sand, I’d put my arm around him, her
advice, weeks had gone by and he hadn’t touched me. “A man and a woman alone
will have sex,” my father had warned, he’d never mentioned sex to me before; I
hoped he was right. “He keeps calling me up, Tina, I can’t understand it,” I say, and
she laughs, “don’t you hate disco music,” she says, and pulls out another cigarette.
“He must be gay.”

I can’t believe that I’m going to see her again, I’ve been living away, and it’s been so
many years. In the photos she still looks young, the same challenging smile. It’s late
when I get to the café, big glass windows that let in the beach, memories of teenage
awkwardness, but when I walk inside she jumps up, screaming, throws her arms
around me, “God, you always look wonderful,” she says like she always did. When I
was with her I believed it, too; growing in stature, like something invisible had
flowed from her into me.

Tina really does look wonderful, though, slimmed down, grown her hair again, it
feels like silk, she pulls her painted nails through it like a slow comb.

Tina is famous, now, there are people who say it’s because she slept with the
Minister, “I didn’t sleep with him, he’s so old!” she begins, as if it’s the first thing I’d
ask her, “he slicks hair across his bald patch with Brylcream!”

She’s got this civilised covering, it wraps around her like veneer, the oversized
words that she uses, the money she’s always spent on designer clothes. She thinks
that’s how she got into politics, because of the coverings. But that’s not what anyone sees.

It’s not what I see, either, it’s not the part of her that I care about, I hate it when she talks about the Party or World Peace or Homelessness. It’s part of what she wants me for, still, it’s why I’m here, but I suppose that I’m just like the rest of them, I see the part of her that she can’t help reveal.

I look at her across the table, the way the light glances off painted lips and chiffon scarves, she doesn’t need any of it. Not the politics, not the fame.

She reads my face even though the lights are dim, the waitress in the mini skirt puts down huge serves of chocolate mousse with fresh cream, I watch Tina’s tongue run over the edge of her spoon, closing her eyes like she’s entered a trance.

Then, halfway through the mousse, Tina leans across the table and whispers to me: a conspirator, as if we were in school again. “It was the Prime Minister that I slept with,” she says.
Jermaine had only put her knickers on the line outside her third floor flat for a minute or two. Five, perhaps, while she took a warm shower and sloughed off the day's dirt. Front-page news that day had been something she needed to wash away: Triad murders and political corruption and then that awful paedophile story.

It was just the end of summer, now, dry heat giving way to autumn, smell of rain and that feeling of release. St. Kilda stunk in the summer, her neighbours did not wear deodorant and she could smell dank underarms and socks as you passed them on the landing. It was a tenement with no indoor stairwell, which meant that her lounge room faced an open corridor and she always felt, somehow, that she was being watched.

But that had not prepared Jermaine for the knicker incident. She had known that this street was famous for its high crime rate, living alone meant that she had to consider these things. At the time, though, she was reasonably certain that it was mostly drugs, and quite enjoyed the idea of being in the hub of things, it sort of came with the profession she was in. Already, she was taking mental notes for her first best seller: “Lourie Street,” with its mix of body odour and cooking smells and dope.

Leon J. Bellenstock was tired by the time he got home from work. He took off his shoes in the doorway and padded in through the carpeted lounge, apricot pink, made him just want to puke when he saw it. His sister Sonya the decorator had chosen it, of course, and at the time he’d said “vomit colour, Sonya, it even smells like somebody just retched on your floor,” but Sonya insisted and so he let her completely redo the house in peaches and apricots and other dried fruits. What did he know, anyway, outside of computers, maybe women went for this kind of thing. And Sonya, if anyone, ought to know.

In the chrome coloured kitchen that reminded Leon of his dentist’s, he threw down the take away Vietnamese and ate it straight out of the containers. Sweat gathered on his balding brow, and he grabbed a beer from the near-empty fridge and patted his developing gut. A sad thing for one so young to be losing his hair, he thought, and all those hours in front of the computer screen weren’t doing too much for his figure, either. Sonya had suggested a Tourak health club that she’d redesigned,
and went on a bit much about the skimpy aerobics outfits and the sexual energy of shared sweat. As it was, Leon managed to sweat perfectly well without any superfluous exercise, and he reminded Sonya about the mutual nature of the sexual act, what about the effect that he'd have on them? The whole idea seemed quite absurd to him.

It was in this mood of self-loathing that Leon decided to take a walk. Quick shower, jogging suit, Nike runners (of course, there was no doubt in his mind that he was never, ever going to jog). The runners he had actually chosen, quite consciously, it was because of Andre Agassi. The way that his hairline receded and his belly jutted out of the tight white shorts, and you could imagine him, half-shaven and slightly dirty and smoking too many cigarettes, and dreaming of fame. Cigarettes, at least, he had given up. Agassi probably had, too.

He had just reached the top end of Carlisle Street when the downpour came, and ducked into a shady-looking milk bar. The shop was empty and smelt of fat. Leon ordered a coffee and the afternoon paper and sat down at the green-speckled formica table next to the Twisties and chips. “Mr. Jap-bait Bellenstock,” called a voice from the doorway. “What are you doing in this part of town – and reading the tabloids!” The woman shook her head in mock disgust and took a seat. She was wet, and it suited her, she ought to go out in the rain more often, Leon thought before he mentally censored himself. “Hi Jermaine, didn’t know I was in your territory. It was raining, you know, messes your hair up and here I was, on the other side of that invisible line.”

Jermaine had always been family to Leon, they were probably third or fourth cousins, mothers’ sides, some sister of a great grandmother from Poland. All of them were from Poland, somewhere back, at least everyone that he knew was, unless they’d migrated from Sydney and maybe then they were Hungarians with red-velvet settees and too much gold on their wrists. You could always tell.

“Someone’s been nicking my panties,” he heard her saying, and clicked back into listening mode. “Did I just hear you say panties?” asked Leon incredulously, at once suppressing vivid visions of G-strings and little bikini briefs with no crotch. “I put them on the clothes line,” she was saying, “I got in the shower, they were gone. Third time this week,” she said, and Leon started seeing hairy men in women’s underwear. “I thought that this time I ought to prowl around a bit, see if I could find
something suspicious,” and then she looked at him in that way she had when a story started clicking over in her mind.

“Maybe it’s connected to that piece you did the other week,” Leon suggested, “You know, the one about the manservants doing the dishes in bow ties and G-strings,” he said helpfully.

“Leon, what are you doing here?” Jermaine asked suddenly.

“What?”

“Well, it isn’t really your area, and a sleazy milk bar, not quite your thing,” she added slowly. Leon looked at her. Beads of sweat started forming on his forehead. Then came the sentence he had been dreading since he was twelve. “And you always did have a thing for me,” she said.

That was the moment when Leon started to cry. He thought about retracing his evening for her, step by step. Just because he might have wanted to take her panties didn’t mean that he had. Was she really reading his forbidden thoughts while she told him about her underwear? His face took a red-blue tinge. His throat tightened like it used to when she teased him as a kid, “rolly-polly,” she had called him then, and he would fight back the tears and swallow them whole and just wish that she would put her soft brown arms around him and let him cry.

Jermaine put aside her disgust at what she was certain, now, that Leon had done. She crossed the linoleum space between the chips and the drink machine and took his head her hands. For a second, she felt herself unbuttoning his pants, except that when she glanced down she saw he was wearing a track suit. “Leon, how far do you live from here?” she asked, back in the milk bar again.

They stood up from the formica table, silently, and edged past the chips. It was twilight. They walked past the bagel shop. The rain had stopped and everything smelt like fresh grass.
Living with Ginny

When Ginny moved into our flat in Lourie street, everything changed. The music we played and the decor. The guests, and the uses of our bathroom. Ginny was running away from a pimp who had threatened to kill her, and this was the farthest she could go: to move cities and stay with Andrea, my flatmate, her best friend. In my terrain.

Ginny had once been a prostitute; that was the only thing I knew about her before she arrived. Other details I learnt on the day she moved in: she was seventeen, with an IQ of 164, and she never used contraception. "I guess I must be infertile," she said.

In the beginning, I admit that she annoyed me, and I even began to sympathise with Johnny the pimp. Ginny had a face like a white pug dog, and she never wore underwear. She had a special liking for Bob Marley but she only had one tape. In the evenings, she would go out with Andrea, thankfully leaving me in peace, although it did mean that I had to cook my own dinner: Andrea was so useful in that way, she’d leave me fresh gourmet pies in the oven and massage my feet after work. Now, she was too busy going to the port with Ginny: "Black sailors — we have very definite taste," she assured me, and really, I suppose that she was right, in the mornings I would meet them over breakfast — big, muscular, beautiful men with shiny skin, and it wasn’t as if they were paying: Ginny had given up business for pleasure, and Andrea was happy to foot the bill.

It didn’t take long for me to get used to this new arrangement, and to even develop a certain liking for Ginny’s quirkiness. "I left home at fifteen," she told me, "I hated my mother, got thrown out of school, they only pay you $4.50 an hour at McDonalds, and they’re shithouse hours." She tried to get a regular job, but the minimum wage only started at sixteen. That was when she met Andrea, who was working in a catering business. "She was great, I loved her straight away," says Andrea. "They sacked her for dancing on the tabletops in front of clients."

But Ginny was smart: she knew she’d end up on the streets if she didn’t get a job, and she wanted her own terms. "Thousand bucks a week," she said, "I used to just put wads in an envelope and send it to Andrea, the rest on drugs. The men were
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mostly revolting, but some were shy and sweet: Not that it mattered much, I was mostly numb."

Then she met Mr. Tagachumi and her fortunes changed, "$400 a week and he was so...timid, he didn’t want much. Mostly he just liked to talk.” He also wanted his own mistress, and he had an apartment. “Johnny wanted me gone,” she shrugged, “he had a hunting rifle, and a machete. He’d used them before.”

It was pretty immediate, really, the way that Ginny’s men and her stories started to fill up the flat, second storey, overlooking other flats and a busy road; no balcony. Semi-residential, next to the tram line, twenty minutes into town and five to the corner shop. The furniture was second-hand from friends and out of the trading post: off-white carpets and lots of cane, fifties deco and unframed art prints peeling off the walls. Andrea was just starting out as a masseuse and I was still studying and selling Continental Cakes in a gold-framed shop next to the wharf.

I suppose, then, that the ceremonies didn’t surprise me all that much – nothing did anymore: the extra $100 that Andrea took from her clients for a hand job (“It’s just another muscle,” she said). The lovely student from Ghana who’d been implicated in political murder and torturing prisoners of conscience (we stopped having him to dinner). Then one day I came home from work, hoping for a massage, expecting guests and prepared to just shower and move on, when I noticed that water was running out from under the bathroom door.

“Hi, sshh, they’re just performing the cleansing ceremony,” called Andrea from the loungeroom, lights dimmed, incense, Bob Marley and naked strangers – all of them white – smearing mixtures of toothpaste and herbs on each other’s skin. I wondered how we were going to get it out of the carpet, and how, exactly, six people could fit in our bath.

That was when I began to dislike her again: despite her having been a prostitute, and just seventeen, and with all those IQ numbers after her name. She was eating my food and she’d never sent me wads of bills, and sleeping with my flatmate and flooding my bathroom and locking me out of the lounge. She brought murderers into my kitchen and made me hate Reggae music and I really wished she would start wearing panties around the house. “Jermaine, people have stopped coming to visit you, you know,” said my friends.

But there was nothing I could do: I couldn’t let Ginny be homeless again, not that I had much say in it. And Ginny wasn’t going to change.
That evening, I wandered the streets, drifting to the walkway near the wharf. A ship had just pulled in from the Bahamas, crisp white uniforms on black, black skin, and I watched as they headed for Darling Street, homeless kids and prostitutes, drug dealers and one-night dives and the fish and chip shops. I went into a cafe and ordered a cappuccino, took a crumpled magazine off the formica table-top and looked around. The sailors were drifting in, now; full, rounded lips and flawless faces, bulging out of tight uniforms.

"Hi, can I join you?" asked one of the men, I think he must have been the most beautiful, smaller and more lean, less overpowering, perhaps.

"Look, this might seem like a strange question," he said to me, smooth hands next to mine on the table; but I was up for the unpredictable tonight, and I smiled.

"Do you happen to know a woman called Ginny?" he asked.
The outer world matters only in so far as it affects the inner. It is the Indian way of experiencing....

- V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*

When Jeremy arrived, I was sipping iced tea in the lounge of the Imperial Hotel. The Imperial was an old British haunt, white and ornate and cool, and the local beggars had been quietly removed from its environs. Indians in flowing silk and western suits sat comfortably with their morning tea. Tourists in tight pants and floral dresses wiped sweat from their brows and drank in the air conditioning with their gin and tonics. If it had not been India, I would have felt out of place.

I noticed Jeremy from the moment he passed through the double glass doors, the way that I always did; enjoying the way that his entrance had drawn the attention of others, too. It was not that he was underdressed in shorts and hiking boots — if you were white in India, it didn’t matter what you wore, even if there was no Raj. Heads turned when he came in; none of the bosomy Swedish tourists had elicited that amount of interest.

I noticed Jeremy the first time I saw him, I still can remember the day. We were standing in a queue for lunch at a cafe, and I felt like I already knew him, as if I had conjured him up somehow. I even remember the coat that he wore, the way I fell into it as though I was meant to be there.

You fall in love and then you are in it; that’s how it felt. Somewhere dark and unconscious where you give up control, flesh surrenders its borders. Otherwise you would burst into love, perhaps.

That was how I had come to risk everything; lying, cheating, running away to India. Knowing, somehow, that this was where it would end.

Delhi: it had been good to me those first few days while I waited for Jeremy. The small suburb where my aunt lived was manageable and easy to navigate, the rickshaw
wallahs on the corner drinking milky tea, the wooden shop with sweetmeats and the smell of pistachio.

Mornings I would walk to the corner and drink sweet chai and then take a noisy rickshaw into town. The hot air blurred the edges of skin, dry heat that made clothing feel inappropriate. In the market stalls I bought cheap cotton shirts that billowed in the breeze, and avoided western fast food places whose fare sat heavy and sour. I bought toilet paper at tourist prices to take back to Meetha’s house, the only comfort I lacked, and felt blissfully at peace.

Then Delhi changed: Jeremy and I were together. We slipped into a small stone room, unseen; on the streets I hesitated, still, to hold his hand. “No one knows us here,” he said; but something was choking me. A layer of yellow dust swirled in the air, and the heat was beginning to burn. At every turn, Indian men pounced on us, touching Jeremy as they passed.

Delhi was choking us, strangling the air before we breathed it. We escaped to Rajisthan, winds were dry there Meetha said through coughs that racked the train station, and we squashed together on a second class bunk heading for Jaipur. The train was clean, three neat red fold-out tiers, untouchables scouring the toilets, middle-class Indians with perfect English sharing stories and hampers of food. “It seems like forever,” I whispered; now, it seemed, we were finally free. Swallowed up by the masses and speeding into the Indian holyland.

Rajisthan. We had crossed an invisible border and everything glowed: Skin sun-baked and splashed with colour, palaces and jewels. In an alleyway in Pushkar we rented a rooftop, bright and burnt clean from the sun. Dawn woke us early. “God you are beautiful,” he said to me, and it felt that in this place there was really a god.

In this place there were many gods, and when we saw the holy lake for the first time ever we were in awe. “Flowers for the goddess,” called the children laden with lotus flowers and candles, congregating where there were whites. “How much? “ I asked naively, and the small boy grinned. “Whatever you want, twenty rupee, fifty,” he smiled, and Jeremy said “one,” I held it out in my hand and the boy took it, still smiling while we lit the candle and set it afloat to the morning prayers. The sunlight was skimming the water, now, the chants grew louder and half-naked men took their sandals off and immersed themselves, the women got their saris wet. Europeans with
heads shaved and their noses pierced took the plunge as well. A woman next to us passed us a reefer, and we shared it and then passed it on.

The streets were golden, infused with saffron. I felt like my edges had been smudged. We passed by a temple, music and sandalwood flooding the sky, lanes overflowing with delicacies wrapped in lotus leaves. A store vendor handed us chunks of white fruit. “It’s been peeled,” I thought, patches of flesh lying open, unprotected, on the dark green leaf.

By this time the sun had grown hot, we were back at the lake again, but the tourists had dispersed. A large man dressed in crisp white robes came out of the lane and approached us, hand outstretched. “I am Brahmin,” he smiled, “twenty rupee,” and without a thought I delved into my purse and handed him a note. Jeremy froze. “I can’t believe you just did that,” he seethed. “You give one rupee to a starving child and then twenty to that overfed Brahmin.”

After that the lake didn’t seem so beautiful anymore. By nightfall I was feverish. Two days later we were moving again and I started to lose my sense of where we were going. “Where are we going, Jeremy?” I asked him, and for a moment even he seemed scared. “Agra, remember? And please cover your mouth when you cough.”

After that all of my memories blurred. Were we really chased down the streets of Agra at night during a black out? Had we actually put our own padlock on the door in the hotel? Was the world going to starve itself because of land degradation? Was it true that I was pregnant?

We were in Varanassi and all that I could smell was burning flesh. “I think I’m pregnant,” I told him.

“If I believed in marriage I would want to marry you,” he said.

I wished he had said something else.

Varanassi smelt of burnt flesh. We found a medical practice in the new part of town and went in. The doctor let me jump the moaning queue and led me to the examining room, taking a urine sample, insisting on a full examination. “How long since your last period? Do you feel nauseous?” The questions kept coming, and I dutifully answered them. “You’re not pregnant,” he finally declared, tilting his head and holding up an instant pregnancy kit.
In Varanassi I realised that neither of us knew where we were. “Bhang lassie, it’s the closest thing to God,” said a New Zealand tourist. But I was feeling further from any god than ever before, and in the evenings we would take turns at asking: “Are you sure that you love me?”

We go back to Delhi, to Meetha’s house, can breathe the air, now when it’s too late. “We thought it was the western sand-wind, yellow dust,” the neighbour says, “the gas leak,” and we leave the house that is emptied of cooking smells, now.

We go back to Delhi and rent a small room. Our tears wet the mattress that lurches when we lie on it, and sex hurts. “I thought you wanted to,” I tell him. “I thought you did,” he says, and then, almost inaudible, “come with me.”

Midnight. We are on an airport bus, soft and air-conditioned, we sit dry-eyed in the seat next to the driver. All of Delhi spread out in the windscreen as if we had never been there.

We are drifting, now, down the steps of the bus, dazed, into the terminal. Our bodies so close that I feel like a part of a Siamese twin.

That’s when I think that I hear it. My senses feel unreliable, but the noise is distinct: the sound of tearing skin.
Good Mates

Sunday mornings had not been the same since Jeremy came back from wherever it was he claimed to have been. "India," he said, once, then never mentioned it again—and it was true that his changed appearance did seem to indicate somewhere like that. The even more scrawny limbs. The darkening circles under dark black eyes. Either India or jail. Or a drug addiction or a failed romance or an illness or a death, perhaps, but none of us would ever know the truth about the intervening years. "Liar," said Freeman, carefully and not to his face. "Wimp. Dolly boy. Illiterate idiot creep."

Christopher Freeman never liked to use his given name. There was something of the left-over boys' school in it, not just in the name. Freeman had to show that he did not hurt. That he did not feel threatened by other men who didn't use their names. That in the face of the gravest pain, he would say fuck a lot and then drown out his sorrows in bong water.

On the surface, Freeman and Jeremy still remained friends. Good mates. Still doing the things that old friends from boys' schools do. Spectator sports on the tele crowding the old rented house, mine and Freeman's; didn't matter what so long as you memorised the players' names. Violent movies, more men with guns this time and then the gory descriptions, co-opting me in their conspiracy. Co-opted I was silenced. Silenced I was swiftly pushed aside.

From the sidelines of their mateship I was denied all the usual stages of grief. Except that today the morning was so heavy that even my skin after a shower wouldn't dry. Just like the days were like then, just like the day it had happened, so heavy and saggy and moist that nobody noticed how much the blood had begun to suddenly flow.

Now they didn't take the idea of blood so seriously. Freeman hadn't been there, anyway, and Jeremy had left almost at once. Soon everything had begun to heal and the empty body and empty house became lively again. Sometimes people asked: where had Jeremy gone and why hadn't Freeman come back and did I need anything, but otherwise things just went silently back to how they were. And I remained silent.
And when Jeremy just reappeared one Sunday as if he had never left, he stayed silent, too. Strangely committed to doing just what he thought we expected of him.

Until one Sunday he turned up with Tracy, which is certainly what Freeman was expecting, some Tracy or other to change the tempo. Which she did, in her seventies throwback way, lanky and brunette in hot pants and leather-fringed vest. Slithery and unpainted, translucent skin showing everything underneath. "I've heard so much about you," she drawled in her drawly voice, and after that the girls who had heard of us kept coming thick and fast. Fat blondes and skinny redheads, doctors and shop assistants, seventeen and forty, until I had begun to think that Jeremy wasn't choosing them at all. In fact, Jeremy didn't seem to be choosing anything, as if he had lost the will to protect himself. As if he no longer had the ability to say no.

"Freeman, do you think that it's true?" I called out hesitantly from the shower, but I knew what he would say. "Lucky bastard, I reckon, did you see the one he had last time? Anyone would have chosen that, but they don't last long, do they?"

None of them lasted long, it was true. I hadn't lasted too long, either, not that there had been much time to last in. Freeman had only just got out the door and he was back again reclaiming his possessions. Less than a summer and too many gone, and even then Jeremy could never refuse. I had liked that about him, perhaps they all did, the willingness to be controlled. I had never felt so powerful. It became frightening. I was in control and I felt all the time that I ought to be punished. And when the punishment came it felt right and I knew I deserved it.

When Freeman came back it was autumn just starting to push through the leaves, and he said all the time that I'd changed. "You were so perfect," he lamented, as if my pedestal had been removed. Inexplicably.

An angry voice from the kitchen disrupted my shower. "Where did you put the rolling papers?"

"I didn't think you used them anymore," I called back.

"Well I do. I do now. I bought them to use and I'll bloody well use them. Where the fuck are they?"

The shower slowed to a warm trickle and I trudged out into the kitchen to hand Freeman the papers from the drawer. I always tried to soften the confrontation of Sundays by being meek. Surely this was my real punishment. Starting on Saturday nights, when we would always make love, an insurance policy against jealousy. An
unambiguous statement of allegiance. Yet somehow it softened the bluntness of daylight, that and the weed.

And I would give thanks that there were five more days in the week. When none of them could keep me willing hostage.

Morning slid into soft grey rain, but Jeremy didn't come to take his place. Freeman said nothing, wiping the day from his calendar, and soon I was starting to shake. I relied on these Sundays, they had become an addiction for me. A place for all the things that had gone unsaid. Waiting for moments of shared recognition sneaked in while the ads were on.

The rain hardened into afternoon, and I was shaking uncontrollably, now. Freeman kept suggesting we go out, but I was determined that nobody would break the spell. I wanted to feel the full measure of my suffering.

"Must be coming down with something," said Freeman, lifting his head between tokes and cups of tea. Still playing the game by its rules. You learn stuff like that at old boys schools, I suppose.

Where I came from you learnt to do things by rules, too. Mills & Boons books and old fifties movies, where hard men kiss yielding ladies and life is a romance and a tragedy in the search for Mr. Right. Not quite like kicking a ball around.

When the letter from Jeremy arrived that Thursday, it felt like an ending that required revision. I certainly would have written it differently, and had, many times. "Gone with Tracy to Seychelles. See you soon," said the only just legible scrawl.

Later, I would take that piece of paper to a graphologist, old friend of Freeman's who used to decipher things for free to get practice. "Wimp," he told me. "Idiot. Liar. Illiterate. Dolly boy. Creep. So what are you doing for lunch today?"
The Lake
The Book of Changes

A lake is something limited. Water is inexhaustible. A lake can contain only a definite amount of the infinite quality of water: that is its peculiarity...unlimited possibilities are not suited to man: if they existed, his life would only dissolve into the boundless.

— I Ching or book of changes

He does Tai Chi like a Chinaman, looks like one, hairless and lithe. He is balding and older than me. I do not expect that he will talk to me.

I am a little startled, really, on the day. He admires my necklace with the Star of David. “Are you Jewish?” he asks. Were he not my Tai Chi teacher, I’d have taken him for a dirty old man. Out of context, I would never have agreed to that after-lesson coffee. When he told me he’d been living with his girlfriend, celibate, for seven years, I would have got up and left the smoky cafe, gone back to the university. “I am Catholic. Waiting for my marriage to be annulled. Then I will marry her. I am Jewish, too, you see,” he adds.

The Tai Chi teacher is fascinated by my Jewishness. Even more by my plans to move to Israel. Fascination tripled by the spectre of kibbutz and the boyfriend he’s never met; but I don’t want to go. “Just like the story of Ruth,” he marvels, quoting my namesake. “Whither thou goest I will go.” Except that Ruth followed her mother-in-law and not a man.

It’s the last breath of summer. Everything is the colour of straw. Hair hangs in strands, dreadlocked by sand; faces are tanned by the sea-spray.

And I follow him. Is it really in the name? I follow him out of some thirst for the desert, unknown. Drenching me in softest bluest of winds. Or so I imagine.

It is the point just before. Everything is mine. The moment, hanging, still, between his leaving and my meeting him. All the men leave the house and women fill it. The world offers possibilities, endlessly. Finally.

I opt for the one that will strangle me.
The Tai Chi teacher visits my house with his fiancee. His annulment is final, now: you can see that he's getting laid. You can see why he waited all this time, too. Sabina is beautiful. Loveliness oozes like wine from her pores. He is drunk on her dark, smooth skin and her hair hanging, long shiny swathes.

They come to my house which is warm, summer still – the men have all only just left. My boyfriend, in China now, writes about food – “they eat roaches!” – and it seems he is fast losing weight. Not a bad thing, I tell myself, putting out the freshly baked bagels and salmon, smoked. This is their pre-wedding party. We wish that your boyfriend could be here, they say unconvincingly.

Everyone who says it doesn’t mean a word. I am too different without him here, the house smells fresh, like flowers and newly baked dough. Men want to court me. I find scented notes on my door. It is easy – they know I am leaving. They know I will go.

And I know it, too. I know that this is the point just before. Real life doesn’t happen this way.

The Tai Chi teacher is courting me too, in his way. We go out for lunch: he tells me I’m wise. I like that. King Solomon was wise – and he had 300 concubines.

All of them count on my leaving, though: the flat mate who tells me she’s gay, the friend with the heroin habit who steals. Ex-lover, leaving me notes; new lover, holding me tight while he calls up his girlfriend in Spain. My life is populated and I revel in it. Everything is mine.

He writes to me from the Holy Land. There is milk here, he says. There is honey. We can make egg nog. All he ever thinks about is food.

All I ever think about is leaving, it is like a death, I act like a woman doomed to die. I take everything that is offered me. I never feel guilt. I block out the truth like the sun that is starting to wane.

“Ruth felt like that leaving Moab,” the Tai Chi teacher says. “Imagine: edges of desert, her husband has died. She doesn’t know anything about Bethlehem; Jesus hasn’t been born.”

I think about how she must have felt: your people will be my people, she says, sounding more sure of herself than she is. Clinging to the old woman, mourning for her past.
“If I’d met you before...” he starts to say, but he feels my cringe. The cafe is full – lecturers and students, steam wafting past from the coffee machine and out of the oversize windows that spill to the street. “Sabina is pregnant,” he starts again. “We are calling the baby Ruth.” I look at him, shocked this time. I don’t know what I should say. That’s quick, I think. “And if it’s a boy?” I say to him.

“My father’s sister was Ruth,” he says quickly. “She was killed in Auschwitz.” I go back home to the house I am going to leave. It is beautiful. Ivy stretches itself through the roof. Stones crumble listlessly from the front yard porch. The key is in the door and no one robs us. Friends drift in and out when we’re not here.

I go to the post box nestling grey in old red brick. There is only one letter. My flat mate is in love with me, it says.

I can’t go home.

I can’t go home, can’t go to my lover’s house – She might find out. Can’t go to my friend’s. Not to the Tai Chi teacher, so I call the ex-lover hastily, from a phone booth on the street. “If you don’t sleep with me I won’t be able to stand it,” he says. “Please don’t come here.”

*It is the end of summer. Everything is the colour of straw and I will follow him.*

*Perhaps I am doing it because of love. I really can’t think of anything else.*
The Telescope

When I was nine I wanted to be an astrophysicist.

I tell people this when they ask me about the telescope.

The telescope sits mid-lounge room, carefully pointing straight up towards the sky.

“So you’re finally looking for angels,” my friend Lara says and she smiles. “I bet you don’t need intermediaries,” I say. Well, of course not.

Lara speaks to angels and I don’t. That’s what differentiates between us. Also the fact that she sleeps with her guru, and he sleeps with everyone else.

Lara is always smiling. I never do. My line of business precludes it. Being coquettish does not go with being a spy; James Bond denies it, Lois Lane knows.

Pointing her telescope skywards and waiting for Superman.

I point my telescope skywards, the fourteenth floor of the building on Weizman and Fifth. I know the flat number, know the man’s name: Eldar Green. Short for Greenberg or Greensveig or -man. That much I don’t know.

What I do know is that every night at nine he gets in the shower. He is slender but not thin. His skin is freckled, hair a sandy-grey and there are three women who come to his flat on appointed days.

The women are beautiful and I give them names. He never closes the blinds; letting me touch his body with my eyes.

My flat is rooftop, ten flights up. Tel Aviv parading underneath and smog that rises: anyone who’s further down will die of lung cancer.

Lara looks around the room, she hasn’t been here since Gershon left, taking all the shelving so that everything is rested on the floor. “Do you miss him?” she asks.

“He slept with all my friends, Lara – except for you of course. But he did keep things clean.”

Two weeks have passed now since Gershon broke the picture tube trying to get the TV off the book case, and took all his Frank Zappa CDs and the Grateful Dead. I hated Zappa, but losing the Dead was hard for me, like the shelving.
"I can't live with one woman," he said to me the day he left, as if that was anything close to what he'd been doing. Gershon had become a Shenkin man, dressing in black and drinking lots of wine and expensive cappuccinos on the street where young men like to be seen, and little rich girls dressed in black go to pick them up.

I kick myself for having a go at the girls, it isn't them I'm angry with, they're all so young and fragile really, and Gershon is such a turd. "It's from being a kibbutznik," he explains to me, "it's like growing up Catholic," though I fail to see the parallel.

"They take you away from your mother at birth," he tells me, "and make you shower with little girls until they all end up being like your sister, and all you want to do is fuck them but there's this incest taboo, so you just feel guilty all the time." He gushes it all out in one sentence, just like that; but I know that pubescent boys never showered with the girls.

Eldar Green was never a kibbutznik, you can tell from the way that he feels so at ease in his skin. He doesn't cringe when he knows he's being watched, he never feels judged. Every woman he touches is an original.

I try to tell Lara about Eldar Green, but I can't just come out and say it. She is sitting on the shag pile in lotus position drinking herbal tea: I keep it in the cupboard just for her. With Lara I always feel like an adolescent, she's so...spiritual, as if earthly matters are too mundane, but there's nobody else I can tell.

"Even Gershon wasn't interested in me," she says finally, after a wait that is inappropriate. She seems to have forgotten that we're talking about fantasy, she just wants to say it.

"Did you want him to be?" I ask, but she doesn't answer, she's had her say; she can go home now.

Since Lara's been seeing this guru, our friendship has become a little strained.

Lara leaves and I take off my shoes to feel the shag pile and refocus the telescope. When Gershon used to go out for the night I would, too, it's probably been months, now. Though it took a few weeks before I found what I was looking for.

Tonight is Tanya's night, but it's already nine p.m. and she's always there by seven, out by ten. I watch them sometimes from the start until the end: the first kiss in
the doorway, the twenty-three seconds it takes them to get off their clothes, like they’ve been on heat since the morning, foreplay by telepathy. She moves like liquid gold; I like her the best. Later they put on their clothes again and eat. He cooks for her and rolls her joints and they must be playing music from the way that they move, and she laughs all the time and touches the back of his neck, you can see the way he shivers catch his spine.

With Rachel it isn’t like that at all. She comes at eleven-thirty and stays the night. They always smoke and drink lots first. She wears French underwear and mini skirts and boots, and they can’t stop talking. Sometimes they never go to sleep.

And then there’s Maya, I only get a quick glimpse of her, she is shadowy, Thursdays at eight. He dresses in faded jeans and a coloured T-shirt, she never comes in. I don’t wait until he gets home.

It’s Tanya’s day but she doesn’t show: I’m disappointed. It surprises me that I like to watch her. Perhaps it’s because she’s anonymous, and because she’s with him, it’s like watching myself; being there.

I don’t in any way resemble Tanya, though, she is probably as close as there is to my opposite. Sweet and fleshy like syrup. I’m more like Rachel, minus the get-up, lean and nervous and hard to the touch, he’d have to get me stoned first and wait half the night until I was ready.

Or maybe not.

I’m watching him through the telescope and he’s started to drink. He’s put on Leonard Cohen or something, you can tell from the way that his mood of self-pity is deepening, and he keeps coming right up to the window as if he can tell that I’m here. He doesn’t turn on the television or the laptop or read a book like he does on the nights that he’s planning to be alone. And suddenly I get an inexplicable feeling. It starts off small but I feel it in the cavity between my lungs. What if Eldar Green is waiting for me.

I take this surprising thought and play with it. What would happen if I went there. Took away the distance that keeps up the fantasy, watch my desire transform into flesh. Not that I’d go there to sleep with him, just meet the man, chat and have a drink or some of that lovely looking Californian head.

I go into the room that was Gershon’s office, I’ll have to think of something to use it for, maybe a growing room, put everything under halo lights and watch it turn bushy and sticky and green. Throw away the males or give them to friends; watch the
females get ripe. I put my hand into a cardboard box on the windowsill and pull out some of the weed that Gershon left me, scummy left-over kiff that smells out the flat, enough to last me another week if I don’t share.

I sit down on the floor-boards and skin up a little number, fragile and thin. It makes my clothes smell so much that I have to change, put perfume on, rinse out with mouthwash.

I dial Eldar Green on the phone. That is my game plan, I don’t want to just rock up there, I’ll catch him unprepared and I know already how much he doesn’t like that. Since the start of the joint I’ve been rehearsing: Hi, I’m a neighbour, can I drop in? Hi, I live across the way, and I’ve been watching you through my telescope. A small acid taste wells up in my stomach: I wasn’t prepared for this, I’m more nervous now than when I was straight.

I look towards the telephone and grip my stomach, I know that if the moment passes, if I don’t force myself then life will take over and Tanya will return and Eldar Green will go back to being a fantasy where he belongs. But I’m getting sick of the way that my life doesn’t touch on reality.

I pick up the phone. I dial, he answers. I give him the first line, the one about the neighbour dropping in, I get it out quickly and I stop. He hesitates, and I try to think what I’ll say next, or if I’ll just hang up, he wouldn’t trace the call, but instead he just says “OK,” in a heavy voice like he’s given up on something, Tanya I suppose, and I ring off and go my telescope.

So that’s how his voice sounds, thick and mellow and he doesn’t roll his R’s, I think while I watch him, he’s coming over to the window now to look, even though he couldn’t see that far without binoculars at least, and I look at my watch, nine forty-five, and I go. That’s the beauty of being a man. A woman getting a phone call like that would have rung the police.

Nine-fifty four. I ring the doorbell that says Eldar Green in small script. He answers it and I’m shaking before I get in.

“Are you the one with the telescope?” he says.

Eldar Green. He’s nothing like he seems from just two streets away. He is larger somehow, and there’s something soft in the way that his shoulders hang. There are imperfections on his skin that I never saw before, and his face opens up and then closes, you can almost read what he’s going to say before he speaks.
“It’s you, isn’t it?” he asks. I think I detect something shaking in his voice, I can’t be sure, he says it with his back to me pouring a scotch. I wasn’t expecting this, I don’t know what to say. But Eldar Green keeps the blinds open, I think to myself, he has sex on the lounge room floor, and he knows. He looks at me unsure, now, and I nod and smile, reassuring him. “But how could you know?” I ask.

“I thought I was just imagining it at first,” he says, looking away, “or that I wanted to. There were all these newspaper reports about Tel Aviv and its telescopes and voyeurs...” He stops for a minute to check me out, like he should apologise for talking about sex – except maybe then he remembers that I’m the voyeur.

“Did you ever want to be watched?” he asks me, catching my eyes now, his are the same bluish grey that I know they will be.

“Not unless I know who it is,” I answer him. I feel like I could tell him anything he asked. “Maybe women are different about it, being watched for us is usually threatening.”

There is instant recognition between us, like we are made from the same warped clay, the one that got left too long when they took it from the earth, dried into mangled shape and unmouldable now.

“What is Tanya?” I ask him suddenly, forgetting that her name is imaginary.

“What?” he says.

“The beautiful one with the long hair, honey coloured everything,” I say, I’ve definitely smoked and drunk too much, “and do you have any more of that Californian?”

He smiles at me and he goes to the kitchen to roll a joint. “Amy,” he says, “but Tanya is close. She’s out of town today.”

“She’s like flowers,” I say to him, I can’t help myself now, we smoke the joint, inhaling deeply, change of scene. “Do you like women, then?” he asks me. “No,” I say quickly, I hate it when they ask me, men, they always do. I tell him my theory about pornography and female sexuality, not mine but I’ve kind of adopted it. “I learnt about sex from porno magazines,” I tell him. “Even the women’s ones are written by men.”

“Do the women know you’re being watched?” I ask him. He laughs. “No.” We keep on talking for hours after that, we laugh a lot and smoke a lot and polish off the scotch. He never touches me. I get up to go.
"Can I watch you still?" I ask, suddenly unsure now about what this means. It's two a.m. and I feel like I want to talk to Eldar Green for eternity, not just talk, and he shakes his head. Yes.

I'm watching Eldar Green and Rachel through the telescope. He stands in front of the window and takes off his clothes and then calls her over and undresses her. They leave the light on, they never do that, and I can see every movement and every curve. After a minute or two I can't stand it anymore and I put on a movie.

There are so many channels now in Tel Aviv that it takes half an hour just to find one. I watch Casablanca for the twentieth time and I cry in all the right places like I'm crying for myself, for Gershon who was never someone you'd leave Humphrey Bogart for; and Eldar Green who I will never have, forbidden and sharing a secret that nobody knows.

I don't know why I'm turning Eldar Green into a romantic fantasy when he's a sexual one, repeating his name, touching it like he might feel the way that my fingers run over the words. Now that I've met him, everything's changed, he acts as if there's a real person inside of him.

Now when I imagine Eldar Green we talk too much. I take him into my growing room, there's green everywhere and heady smells, and a skylight through the roof so you can see the stars and feel the breeze sweeping over you. He touches my face, I like the roughness in his hands, he must have been a farmer or something, once; once, something hard etched itself into him, cutting open his skin, not letting it heal completely. I think that might be the place where I can get in.

I want to get inside of him, I don't know what that means, I say it to him and he jumps - squirms, frowns, I'm not sure what that movement is, but something has frightened him. "I want to know what you feel like," I say, I trace his bones, his muscles, his hair; I keep my eyes open, I want to watch how I register on his face, what he looks like when he comes.

In my fantasy, I am almost not there at all, which never happens, almost never, I am always imagining my own pleasure: Something completely physical and hard. There is never any kissing or touching, no words, even faces distract me: I don't want anyone asking for anything in return.

And then a man appears in my fantasy life and it becomes about him, his body, his orgasm: and I disappear.
By the time that Gershon left, all I could think about was where he’d been before he got to me, and how he managed to always be hard when he didn’t even like me anymore. We could be talking about the phone bill and he’d want to screw me; I can’t remember the last time that we made love.

When we met it wasn’t like that at all: Lara and I had gone to kibbutz after the army, she spent her time in a room with her new boyfriend, got pregnant, got married, miscarried, divorced. Lara was my warning light, big and flashing and insecure, like she never had anything to protect her from the vicissitudes of men, and men were supposed to protect her from everything else. My life was going to be different.

Gershon left me when I stopped wanting his body; he didn’t understand the way that his body was connected to his mind. He took it personally: you don’t find me attractive anymore, he would say, do you know how that makes me feel?

Those were the times when I would pity him, the way that the truth of it hurt me, too, the way that I loved him once; so I tried. That was about the time that I bought the telescope. The thing that would save my body from going numb.

He affects every part of my body, this Eldar Green. Pulling my heart out like it could be held in his hand; churning my stomach if ever he pulls down the blinds. Keeping me hot and flowing and blood-filled, so I can barely walk. The image of him overtakes me.

I go over to my bedside drawer, the one with the underwear and the narratives of my dreams, and sentences copied from books. “Desire is there to persist as desire,” says the reminder I’ve left myself. “Not as anything else.”
The Bottom Drawer

If we do nothing the people will change of themselves.
- Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching

"There must be a regulation against it," the General Secretary insisted.

"I've checked everywhere," the lawyer replied. "The kibbutz regulations only mention offensive behaviour. Being ugly is not a behaviour."

The Secretary shook his head and leaned back in his fake leather chair. Pink almond blossoms rained down like candy snow flakes. The lake had risen bravely now to meet it's shore: no water restrictions this summer. The factory was giving dividends, chicken subsidies were up. All was well in his little world, he thought. Almost.

"Does she work?" asked the lawyer, trying another angle.

"Sorry? Shula work? Ah, no, not really," said the Secretary abstractedly. "She had an accident, it gave her an incurable disease."

"Is it recognised by the Ministry of Health?" asked the lawyer.

"Well, no."

The lawyer smiled for the first time during their meeting, wiped his hand across the bald patch that shone when the sun hit it, packed up his briefcase to brave the last whispers of rain. "Still winter, eh? That should soon be over," he said.

When I first took over the Secretary's job, it didn't seem so daunting. "Piece of cake," he said to me. "Just don't open the bottom drawer."

"What's in there?" I asked him, "or is it a figure of speech?"

"The Shula File," he said. "Don't do it. This is the most important piece of advice you will get."

That afternoon, the ambulance driver came into the office. He was squat and intense. Panic shone in his hooded eyes. "There's going to be an earthquake," he whispered.

"Pardon?"
“SSH,” he whispered again. “Didn’t you see the news?” By now there were veins popping, blue-black through from his brow.

“But they said it could be anytime in the next fifty years,” I reassured him.

“It could happen anytime. We need the ambulance,” he insisted, peering around the corner in case there were eavesdroppers. “Shula’s taken it again. She’s got the spare keys.”

I called Shula into my office, it’s what I assumed I should do. There was paint peeling off the wall, I noticed, hoping it wasn’t leaded. “Shula, why did you take the ambulance?” I asked.

“I can’t get a car,” she said, anger piercing her even tone, eyes turned suddenly glassy, a screen going up.

“But what if something happens to one of the children?”

“I hope those little parasites all die,” she snarled.

At this point, I began to notice that Shula was particularly ugly. Acne blistered her too-white skin. A nylon tracksuit hung ill-fitting on lumpy limbs.

“I want the keys, Shula,” I tried again, choking back my own rage, now.

“And what will you do about it?” she threatened, stomping ungainly off into the hallway.

Next morning, the factory manager came to my door. “Shula isn’t working. It’s bad for morale. Do something,” he demanded, and so I summoned her again.

“I don’t work. I have a disease.”

“But you guard the settlement fine,” I said. Years ago, Shula had volunteered to be in charge of kibbutz security, and she still managed to do it, even after the accident.

“That’s only because I like guns,” she said. “Semi-automatic. And men in uniform.”

“She keeps a Rottweiler in her room, too,” said the woman from Accounts as she walked past.

“Call a lawyer,” the factory manager told me.

“Just don’t open the bottom drawer,” said the ex-Secretary when I turned to him for advice.

Later that day, I took out a key and I opened the drawer. An awry light seemed to emanate from its depths. A sudden wind blew in through the window and scattered a
room full of paper all over the floor – legal documents, minutes of meetings, letters exchanged in bad handwriting. I tried to squeeze all the pieces back in but they didn’t fit. I panicked. I pushed. I re-locked the contents away and I hid the key.

I was at a loss. Unsavoury snippets of lives I had come not to care for were weighing me down. Crowding my bedroom to knock at the door to my soul. I was losing my boundaries, other people’s lives-becoming-me. In the days I kept the office shut.

Then something happened, a subtle thing. A change of air. A week passed, then two, then three, and somehow everything seemed quiet. The job started to grow on me, problems created their own solutions, the sky turned a pale cornflower blue. Red Anemones sprouted wild, and the lake almost filled to its brim.

“Shula’s in China,” the ambulance driver said hoarsely, behind my closed door. “Let’s change all the locks.”

Suddenly, all my feelings of helplessness returned. I hadn’t been conscious of her absence until now. How could one woman generate so much power over my life?

When Shula came back, the clouds seemed to gather in strength. All I could see was the shadow she cast, the watery eyes, the matted hair. Clothes that hung loosely to hide parts that nobody wanted to see.

“Here are the keys to the ambulance,” she declared. “You were right.”

Days flew by more gracefully after that, and when Shula put an ad in the local paper she came in to show me. Chinese Therapies. Treatment for constipation and well-being. Shula, Kibbutz S., 2982439.

“You’re working!” I said, relieved. “Do you make much money?”

“I only take donations,” she answered, smile rising darkly. “And by the way, your energy field has too much sanguine. Give the job away.”

“She has heat in her touch,” said the woman from Accounts. “If you let her touch you, that is.” But they did. Clients from all the Galil would descend on our clinic that perched on the hill. Patchouli and Indian ragas spilled into the lake. Her acne had started to heal and she died her hair copper, attracting the light. “She cures babies by touching them,” they told us in the car park on their way back home.

“She’s still not working,” the factory manager said. “And her skin is still white and sticky.”

“Why don’t you just charge more money?” I finally ask her, doing my job.
"It's a gift," she answers me calmly. "I must give it away or I will lose it."

I shoot a long look at the bottom drawer. She follows my eyes. "You shouldn't be in this line of work," she says. "It could be bad for your aura."
I don’t know if it really looks that good or if it’s just the way that I feel in it. Usually, it takes me a while before I decide to wear it: the sleeves are an odd shape, the hem is crooked, it’s altogether more flowery than I would usually wear. But then I feel the crepe cling to my skin, the way the wind blows the skirt, like rough hands against my legs; the bodice that ties up tight with matching string.

It’s not like my other dresses, the orange one, bright and skin-tight, blaring, or the loose Indian ones that fall like sacks. I wear it to weddings and festivals, with the shoes laced with leather. It feels comfortable enough that I can choose not to notice the way that I’m seen.

It’s Pesach, beginning of spring, flowery breezes, sun setting wispy clouds alight. Perhaps Ari notices, it’s hard to tell and I’m not really paying attention, “nice dress,” he tells me as we leave the house, but we both know that I’m wearing it for someone else. I don’t stop to wonder how that makes him feel.

We walk up towards the dining room, twilight muffling colours and speech. Ronen sits next to me, the places are marked for the seder, he looks at me quickly and opens the wine. “Let’s get drunk,” he says as he pours, it’s Pesach, you’re supposed to, and his wide hands brush mine when he talks, spilling out stories from other seders, prophets blowing in through opened doors; but I’m watching for somebody else.

I try to catch his eyes across the table. I don’t give him a name, it could be dangerous. We sit in a rectangle, bodies facing, an extended family with gefillte fish and too many matzo balls, petty rivalries and fantasies kept safe under tablecloths. We try to sing, but nobody knows the same tunes; we reminisce about our grandfathers, we are like the pioneers, a generation has been cut away. These are not seders that our children will remember, even they forget the tunes when they perform. “It must be hereditary,” somebody says. I’ve heard it said that a community that doesn’t sing together has no glue.

I try to catch his eyes as he serves up the soup, placing the trays overflowing with roast chicken legs and fragrant rice, watching through the closed glass doors while he chain smokes; but he looks away. When the table collapses on my legs,
spilling the gefillte fish and the grape juice for the children and the eggs with salt, he has no choice: I am wet with salt water and wine and chicken soup, blushing while I try to replace the old wooden slab on its trestle.

Rabbi B. says that the mind is a sexual organ, he’s written a book about it: Kosher Sex. That’s what I’m thinking about while I pick the pieces of seder meal from my lap.
I liked seeing Sorrel, it seemed that she had a piece of him always with her. I felt like that about his children and his wife, too; sometimes I would stretch out my pale hand just to touch them as they passed.

Sorrel had a pair of binoculars, she used them for watching the stars, or falling meteorites. “And you can see the hothouses from here, too,” she would tell me, knowing the way that both our houses faced into them, flat plastic billowing across our rocky view.

In the mornings, I sit opposite the hothouses where the air is kept humid and baby plants get tended to gently by wide, strong hands. There is always dirt ingrained in his palms, settled into the pathways that have been there forever, pieces of lives etching themselves onto the rough, flat surface.

If you looked at my hands, small and white and smooth, you could see part of him there. Or on Sorrel’s. Her lines would be different, though.

Sorrel annoys me. She’s my closest neighbour, the edge of her garden almost jutting into mine. It’s hard to say exactly what I don’t like about her — and what draws me to her, right now, perched on the edge of her balcony like a bird of prey, clasping those binoculars. I know what it is that she wants to see.

I know what she’s looking at but I can’t understand it — or maybe I do. Spiders webs glint off my own rocky outcrop, it’s so dry here you can see the steam rising off the hothouse roofs, the shape of the actual waves as they flow to the wadi, where hikers will suddenly be caught unawares in wafting blankets of air.

Everything there smells like roses, chrysanthemums, anemones, flowers I have no names for and seedling plants. When you open the plastic doors, their opaque heaviness overcomes your arms and then your being, heady and lush and wet like a secret world.

Across the garden from my house is hers: her face is hard and square, almost grey, her body thin so that clothes hang from her, and she makes a point of not caring for clothes. There is something hard about her, I say hard again and not some other word.
because it's that part of her I cannot penetrate. A blankness in the slightly sunken eyes, a fullness in her breasts that she leaves free to hang, too low, too carelessly, while I anguish over the lost elasticity of mine.

My body is not exactly as it used to be, stretch-marked and baby-sucked into other forms. Not the ones I started out with, not the way that I thought I would be. I hate the thinness of me, new creases that ply themselves into my face year by year, a bridge across the nose, no one notices but the mark is there. A woman who worries and frowns. I start to think about laser surgery.

Sorrel, though, doesn't seem to care; perhaps it is only seeming, not real, her lack of concern – and it does not flatter her. Sorrel has long blonde hair and fine, arching eyebrows and strong lean limbs. If she thought to, she could be attractive. Possibly, some men think that she is, and that is enough for her. She is busy with other things.

In the hothouses, my wrinkles melt away, palms turn wet and soft like a baby's; things start to spin in the primal heat of new growth and beginnings. There is darkness and chaos here, and the first newness of order. Outside this birthplace, life is less compressed, more even, it flows from night into day into summer dust storms, hail and rain. Beings grow to fruition, and then fade and die. Here, it is as if there were only birthing and youth; the plants mature and wither in some other place we never get to see.

Anything could happen in this place where all things are conceived. Energies peak and forms lose their outer coatings and are freed.

I am unhurried when I go there, into the heat that transforms and makes life grow. Sorrel watches it from the outside through her binoculars. I plunge in, pushing the boundaries until they implode from the force.

She watches me as I push my way down the slope, stones catch in my sandals and I stop to glance back at my house which will never look the same. The morning light of spring air blinds me, and I turn away.

She never mentions his name, but it fills up the spaces between us, and when I meet her it is always there. "I want you to know her," he says to me, and to her, perhaps, but I'm not sure what that means. Before I became aware of him, she meant nothing to me, another neighbour; but now she comes alive. In the afternoons, sometimes, her son climbs the stairs that separate our houses, she follows him and we
drink ice-tea and she brings up her home-grown to share, and we look out over the hotheances, wordlessly. “There’s a better view from my place,” is all that she’ll say.

I make my way down the slope, without looking back. I feel the pressure of fragile hands as they strain against large, plastic doors. It is wordless here, I feel the words that I thought I’d be saying dissolve in the heavy air.

Sorrel believes we are all connected to a past life; she tells me over a joint and some thin red wine, she thinks that’s why people attract each other; that’s what causes this powerful, inexplicable connection we sometimes, suddenly feel.

“But that’s just a metaphor,” I say, the idea seems simplistic, like God in the sky with a beard: that we have complete souls which have been here, in another body at another time, just moving over the ages from one container to the other. Having to work it out all over again.

But when she says it, I feel like I’ve been winded: if it’s true then perhaps the connection I have with this man unspoken between us is something more.

If it’s true, then maybe it won’t melt away.

Later, Sorrel explains it differently. “Think of it like this,” she says, and starts to explain about quantum physics and energy changing forms but always maintaining itself, like water into ice into steam. “Hey, I just explained it like that to my son,” I say.

She smiles a knowing smile.

“So then our soul or spirit or whatever never gets destroyed,” she continues. “It becomes part of other people, and then we all carry that spiritual history around with us, through our families and people who’ve affected us. And when we meet someone, there are these other parts of us and of them that are responding, too.” She stops to take a breath, sip some wine and have another toke. “I’ve never seen it like that before,” she suddenly says.

I walk the slope. Don’t look. Not forward or back. Carry the knowing inside of that place where my spirit or somebody else’s perhaps resides. Doors open. Heat escapes. Energy is transformed, and some part of me dies: or moves into another space.
Night

When it’s dark, you can’t see their names, only feel the way the letters meet your fingertips.

I steal into the blackened mail room, feel my way past the obstacles: tables stretched lengthwise, the ragged edges catch my skirt; rubbish bin tipped on its side. My hand moves to the letters that spell out their names, prying open the metal flaps. My skin made raw.

It’s dark inside, but the moon is full. I take the contraband to my room, turn the key swiftly, sit on the cool stone floor with my back pushed hard against the door and prise open the packages.

The first letter is small and secretive, even the print is not bold. It’s been written hurriedly on one of those square coloured notepads used for meetings, stapled under the name, I have to use my fingernails to open it. “Sunday, twelve, under the date tree,” it says, as if there were only one. And then the next day: “watching you.”

Sometimes I hate it here, and sometimes I’d never be anywhere else. It’s small-time, narrow and bare, just rocks and sand out there through the half-drawn shades. I go through my routine: tend to the date palms, make sure the irrigation’s right. Watch the way the oasis rises and falls, changing the horizon.

Lunch times we all crowd in, doesn’t matter what the weather’s like, same time of day. If you don’t get in there twelve p.m. you could miss the bourekas or the soup, but I don’t usually mind it, gets a bit crowded in here, same faces same food, and town is only a twenty-minute ride. And it’s by the sea, open and windy, big hotels and sleazy shwarma joints, full of faces you’ve never seen.

Night. I love it just after the sun goes down, I know there’s only a few hours left. I feel like Peter Parker turned into Spiderman, there must be a female equivalent, but none comes to mind. I don’t need to dress up to do it, transformation at midnight, no catgloves or mice with carriages; my skin hides me.
It's midnight. I push through the door. Some nights I am less careful, I let the light swell in through the slits in the hinges, leave it ajar. Tonight isn't like that, though.

I push my hand into her letter box, it's hard and cold. My fingers wrap round the envelope, I squeeze it out through the opening; it has her smell. I hear a sound, slip silently through the door with the blotches from sticky tape, “General Assembly. Membership vote,” says the sign up outside.

I take slow steps to my room, you can't usually hear but it's autumn now, and there's crunching of leaves.

In the beginning he doesn't say much, short notes about where they might meet or things that have happened during the day. I stumble across it by accident, between the postcards of topless beaches in Yugoslavia and the air-thin butter-stained aerogrammes and the thick birthday cards.

At first I don't know where the letters are coming from, I find them in amongst her mail. Letters here tend to get mistreated, left next to the telephone, or under the dog mat or fallen inside the couch. The rooms are bare and sandy, and we use the roofs to keep cool, pull up ladders and spread out the thorny date palms overhead like a year-round succa, sitting on dusty mattresses on the floor. It makes us feel like nomads.

I watch for who he could be. Taking in all her moves: who she speaks to in the dining room, what clothes she wears, I begin to notice her in a way they I never had. She's always seemed reserved and almost mousy, restrained, but now there is an energy to her that's unmistakable: a swing in her hips when she wears those jeans, buttoned, settled just under her waist; the clinging shirts with no bra. Other days, she seems just as she always had, neat and severe, hair pulled back tight in a chignon; even then there seems to be something burning inside of her that I'd never seen.

A week passes and I still haven't figured it. The unshaven cowboy with lownslung shorts and heavy boots, black curls fall in his eyes when he smiles.; the cook, a little overweight, but muscly, bright with charm. The economic manager, slim and freckled, short hair and even features, quick on his feet – perhaps that's what appeals to her.
On the outside, everything is as usual. Dates ripen on the palms, tourists drive by on their dusty way to the sea. But the world has taken on a different tinge: reds that glimmer like blood, dripping, and clouds of molten grey. When the sun rises it shoots out rays like a cannon. When she walks by, I lose my balance; her presence fills up rooms.

It doesn’t seem right to me: As if too much light has shone her way, she’s filled with it, it darkens the spaces around her, there isn’t enough to go round.

That is why I prefer the sunsets, twilight, charcoal smudged across the sky. Shadows. That’s when I come alive.

The note is written hurriedly on the back of a paper bag, as if he couldn’t hold the thought without writing it. “I fantasise about you,” it says. There are no details of any fantasy, though, just an oblique request. “I want to know what you like,” writes the heavy hand, I can feel his breath behind it while he scrawls the words.

I start to imagine him, as if the notes were meant for me. In my mind, he isn’t anyone I know, but I feel the suffering behind his words; the impossibility of what he’s asking for.

I don’t know if she answers him, I assume that she does, I assume that she knows who he is, that it’s just the edge of what’s happening between them that I see.

I can’t stop myself, it’s like an addiction, the way their existence intrudes into mine. I get control and it pulls me back like a loaded spring. Swamping my capacity for aliveness, heightening some senses till the others seem to fade.

That’s how my body feels every evening after reading the mail, like discoloured clothing, easily torn into shreds in the wash; too long on spin-dry. Everything wrung out except for my hunger.

Then one night I stumble across it. Her note in his letter box.

I recognise the writing. It is mine.

In the afternoon he walks right by me, as if I’m invisible, as if I’m not part of his life at all. He even slams the door.

But I know who he is now. That gives me rights. In the night it is never like that, he comes to me at will, he writes to her but the letters are mine: they’re meant for me.
At night he comes to me, his breathing is uneven, he opens the door to the mail room, reaching out for me in the dark.

I start to write to him, opening my body onto the page. Mix my letters with hers, giving him what he asks for; both of us as if we are one.

Her letters skirt the truth, fairytales that tease with their allusions. I set him free. Sealing the envelopes with my juices so he can bury himself in the smell. She seems like she’s bursting in this place and there’s no relief. The way that we’re all so huddled together, you have to keep your boundaries drawn or things could overflow.

It’s not as if she isn’t getting her share, but there’s something else that she’s looking for, I can see it in the way that they meet, there’s something waking, I don’t know how they keep the tension masked like that, I can see it bubbling over the surfaces like ice cream plunged into soda.

He isn’t tall or blond, not black-eyed, thin. Not a man who’d stop you in the street, not even if you exchanged words. There is something primal about him, it’s not just sexual, otherwise it wouldn’t have that pull, not on her. Not on me. The way that he says too much but not what he means, things he doesn’t know how to say, that there isn’t vocabulary for. The way his body calls to her in the dark.

Mine answering.

They are under the date palm, leaves throw their jagged light, cutting the space between them, something has to otherwise the force would be too strong. I watch from another place as if she is a separate entity.

As if she isn’t me.

When she’s with him, something dims in her; it’s the idea of him that’s keeping her alight. Seeing him is filled with an ache that she can’t comprehend, she wants to reach out but something stops her, it always does, and when she moves away you can hear some part of her being torn. Perhaps it stays with him.

I wonder what goes through his mind when he sees her like this, when daylight shows up her imperfections, her hesitancy, the lines creeping over her face and the greying hair, full lips that chafe when she speaks. In the daytime he doesn’t say.
In the day I watch them walk through the dining room, she sits at the furthest
table; he walks right by. Their eyes meet in between spoonfuls of soup, can’t think
why you’d want to serve it in heat like this, he wipes the beads of sweat off his
forehead and looks over at her. Electricity, taut across the room.

“Hi,” I say to him, breaking their line of communication. “How are your kids?”
I knew I was going crazy when I read his mail.

It’s one thing to write it in a story: but the urge seemed to pull at me, rising out of a place that seemed foreign, but known. As if I had actually done it before.

It was because of the handwriting, too. And the thickness of the airmail envelope, bulging from the plastic bag that got left on the desk of the secretary’s office. And no one was there.

At first, I just considered it: Sorrel’s neatly printed address on the back. And his name. I liked to see it printed, I don’t know why, as if it assured me of his existence in some way. Otherwise he might just be an imaginary character in a story.

I didn’t take the letter right away. It took time for the idea to gel, for the courage to mount inside of me. For the trigger to get pulled back far enough that all I had to do was just let go.

I walk out of the office, my own package in my hand, and he’s standing there. Sometimes I think he materialises at my whim, like he does on paper or in dreams or fantasies. I think about him and he’s there.

“Hi,” he says coolly, absent-minded, cold. His mate from work is next to him, he doesn’t even comment on the parcel I lug through the door that’s marked with sticky-tape. “Why do kites have tails?” says Snoopy in the cartoon promo for Independence Day. I don’t linger to find out.

Later that night, in bed with Ari, I will turn my back to him and say: I’m going crazy. I can’t tell you about it yet, but I know I am.

It’s earlier the same day. I go to the mail room, the letter’s in his box, now, and no one’s there. I’ve been home already twice, tried to sleep, bathed (again), written, read. Ari thinks I’m becoming compulsive obsessive with the number of times I wash myself in a day, but I like the way that the water holds me, it’s a caressing feeling, like the warmth of another human being. It helps me to feel my skin.
“Why are you going crazy?” he’ll ask, still back to back, that’s how we talk these days if we don’t want to yell. “Maybe I’ll give you some of my stories to read,” I say, it’s an easy way out, I know, but I can’t tell him straight out like this, even if he knows.

Ari knows everything before I tell him, not the weird details, but the outlines of stories that happen again and again.

The sun melts the paths, today, I have to wear shoes. It’s the last day of the last month before summer. I’m wearing a patterned dress, falling loosely, I feel like my body has shrunk since the last summer inside of it. The dress is large – I wore it pregnant, both times – but I like the way it barely scrapes my skin, so that I walk from the house feeling naked, rested and bathed, smelling of Dead Sea minerals, roses and almond oil.

I go into the mail room and I take the letter out of his box and put it in between other mail; I’m halfway down the path when the secretary calls out. I ignore her; it’s possible that, preoccupied, I wouldn’t hear her from here, but she persists, following me down the pathway. “Here,” she calls out. “You forgot this,” and hands me another envelope, and I try to look normal, there must be fear in my eyes; I’m enjoying it.

I start to understand how a thief must feel.

Inside my room I lock the door and try to work out how to open the envelope so I can close it again, and he won’t see. I know that in movies they steam them, but I can’t help picture all of it going up in flames. Then, of course, I could just tear it open and he’d never get the letter from Sorrel: that would defeat my purpose, though. And it’s cruel. I don’t want to hurt him.

It’s just that there are things I have to know.

By the time I’m finished mangling the airmail envelope, the pale blue pages fall out, thin and neat and hardly creased at all. I’m surprised by her handwriting, the width of it, the almost illegible way that it flows.

She’s in the Pyrenees, there’s loads of snow. Reading a book by Maeve Binchy, the synopsis takes up half the letter; so do the mountain peaks and the badly described glaciers and river beds. I skip over most of it, looking for good bits, a reference to the hothouses, maybe, and it’s in there: along with “missing you” and “love to the family” type things.
Nothing revealing, except for if you read between the lines. And she doesn’t leave much place for it, the words are well-spaced, but she cramps the lines together like dense forest, as if she’s afraid of what he might see.

I fold the thin airmail paper back into its place, wondering for a second if he might get it fingerprinted. Take out my UHU glue stick and smooth over the rumpled edges with my fingernail. Put the letter inside a hard plastic folder and race back to the mail room, hurrying past the economic manager, he swipes a sideways look but I get there a full minute ahead of him.

Somehow, the contents of her letter stay with me, there’s almost something condescending in the plain, explanatory way that she writes to him. She might be intending something else, but I can’t see it. “I’m missing you,” is the only message that actually there.

I wonder, now, what he would do if he knew that I’d taken it. He may be wondering how the envelope got so crumpled, how it got to tear. Maybe he even suspects me.

I wonder what I’d do if he asked me: “Was it you?” he’d say, and I know that I’d lie to him, that’s how I imagine the exchange, I’d have to, or he would never want to see me again.

I like the feeling of being on that edge.

Ari rolls towards me in bed, pulls my taut body over into his, smoothes my hair out of my face and kisses my tears.

“I’ll give you my stories to read,’ I say again, feeling like I owe an explanation that’s too complicated to give.

“But you never want me to read them like that, I mean, for what they say about you,” he says.

“This time I do,” I tell him. “But don’t you think it’s a silly way to tell you things?”

I’m wrapped up warm and tight in his arms, now, hands that are soft and wide and brown, with sculpted fingers. I love the color of his skin, the heat of it, the smooth way that it covers that place between his shoulders and his chin; shaped perfectly to nestle in.
After that he doesn’t ask me anything again. The next day, I take out the stories I’ve never given him, placing them carefully inside a transparent plastic envelope, and put them in the sock drawer next to his bed.

Just as I’m placing them in there, though, fighting the perfectly folded socks for space, I pull out the envelope and carefully remove the story about Sorrel.

Some things need to come in installments.
It's amazing how small things can grow to such proportions if you don't keep them
cut back in time. That's how it was with the tree: once they were in the thick of it, it
was no longer just a matter of pruning back a couple of leaves.

The tree was an old willow that hung down long across the path that separated
Merav's house from Tony's. Winter time, the branches got so long they'd twist back
upwards, grabbing on to anything they found, sometimes hitting passing children
straight in the face.

Merav's husband, Omri, was the gardener. He had a gardener's temperament:
slow and precise. He was difficult to anger, but stubborn as anything if he thought he
was right. And you couldn't argue with him, either; it was like talking to a slightly
hard of hearing but determined wall.

Tony's wife, Odetta, was a time bomb, and I always wondered how come she
had not gone off before. If she had, it must have been in the privacy of their compact
home, between the badly chosen cupboards and the walls painted to match, as if
blending them in could modulate the damage.

"We can't get involved," I said to Ari: versions of the story had been told to us
already, from opposite ends. "Promise me," I asked him, and he smiled and nodded.
"Sure," he said, in that voice that meant I'd have to wait to see if he meant it.

That night, Omri and Odetta came to a meeting of the kibbutz Secretariat; in the
thirties when someone did all of the translating from Hebrew to English, communism
was still in full swing. I always wondered how we had ever escaped having a
politburo.

Our new General Secretary lived on a neighbouring kibbutz, and something
about him wasn't right. I couldn't put my finger on it. He was unusually tall and
overweight, giving him a menacing demeanour that didn't suit the man inside. He also
hadn't quite worked out where he was, a kind of obvious pitfall in a place where even
we could not agree on a single version of our own history.

"The tree is in a private area," Omri began, in that quiet voice which either
inspired immense respect or made you crazy. "Since the building finished, we have
redefined which areas of garden will remain communal. We signed on maps. It's no longer my job. The tree belongs to Odetta and Tony, now."

Meanwhile, Odetta’s little chest was heaving in a way I’d never seen it do before. It made her breasts more prominent; the heavy breathing mixed with a fine layer of sweat did not go unnoticed.

"Look," she said, in a voice we had not heard from her before. "I moved back into my house and found that fucking stupid tree was suddenly mine. It’s dying. It’ll cost hundreds to revive it. Not to mention the roots blocking the sewage."

A long collective sigh emerged from the committee members. "Please," somebody whispered pleadingly. "Don’t mention the sewage."

Odetta pulled her chest back in one long in breath, nodding silently at the request. Thankfully, she wasn’t going to go too far.

"Anyway," she spat at Omri. "You don’t do the gardening at all. You just sit around on your fat ass while the trees all die and the grass reaches my navel and Merav goes round fucking anyone she likes and only you don’t see it."

At this point, the new General Secretary made the first of many fatal errors. He didn’t, like me, hope that Odetta would just finish before she started naming names, and make Omri start naming names as well. His private life was not about to be spread all over the kibbutz like it was strawberry jam.

"Perhaps," he said, "We could cut down the tree."

Well, maybe this silly fat man thought suddenly that he was Solomon. I don’t know. But he obviously knew nothing about the tree. At this point, all six members of the politburo stood in unison and called out "No!" Odetta looked like she was going to faint; Omri had suddenly got colour in his face, and looked as though he was about to say something important; but the moment passed.

"So," asked Ari, "What happened then?"

"Don’t worry, no one mentioned us," I said.

He looked at me as though I’d said something completely out of context. "No, I don’t mean that," he said, brushing the idea away. "What did you decide about the tree?"

That night, Tony called me up, and Merav called Ari.

"Odetta’s really pissed," Tony says to me.
"She shouldn't be drinking should she? Isn't she pregnant?"
"No, she's just got fat. I meant pissed off."
"Oh. Is there something I can do?"
"Well, I already spoke to that big ugly man, but he just told me that threatening violence wouldn't work on him."
"Tony, you threatened him? Over a tree?"
"No, I just used my normal voice."

"Omri's actually angry," says Merav to Ari.
"Hey, that's great. A display of emotion."
"He broke all the new plates that I just brought home from Home Centre. Threw them one by one against the tree."
"What about the shards of glass?"
"Ari, do you know how much they cost me?"
"More than it would cost to prune the tree?"

That night, Ari and I walked across the big lawn that had turned to weeds to see the tree. It's true that while we had been making all our houses bigger and better, the contractors laid waste to anything that once was beautiful. The eucalypt by the children's house had withered to a shadow of its former self; the paths were slippery with mud mixed up with dried concrete, and clumps of it had formed right through the gardens. "I don't care if our house is bigger," our eight year old had said. "How could they uproot our olive tree?"
"But we've replanted it. Look, there's new leaves growing already."
"It's just a stump, mummy. I used to climb it. We used to pick the olives every year and pickle them in big jars, give them out to friends."

In between Tony's house and Merav's, in the oldest corner of the kibbutz, stands the tree. It was planted five years before the first house, eight years before the first child was born. Every year on Hanukah, we'd run with lit torches from the temporary site across the wadi until here, light a bonfire and a giant hannukia and sing. Even in the rain we'd run, leaving our mobile homes on the hill opposite to reach the place where everything would be different: a view of the lake, a house that didn't come on wheels.
The water pipes would not be above ground, so that on *hamsin* days the water in the shower scalded. And we would leave behind the things that had torn us apart.

Ari and I looked up at the tree and saw it weeping. A willow has got roots that spread out wide and thin; they get into the sewage and you can’t untangle them. Left untreated, it grows downwards, deeper into the darkness in search of nourishment, even if it means destroying everything around it.

Gently, Ari got a leg up on the tree and started cutting back the wanton branches. Higher up, he used a small handsaw. Underneath, I took a hose and sprinkler I’d brought with, attached it to the fire hydrant where the two paths met, careful not to let the broken glass get through my skin.

The next morning, for a brief moment after the sun had risen red above the lake, Odetta thought that Omri had pruned and re-watered the tree. And he thought that perhaps Odetta had.
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Fire

82  Ruth Lacey
Daniel stopped at the hitching post to pick up a woman. Woman or girl, he wasn’t quite sure as his car drew near.

“You’re new, aren’t you?” she said, getting in and adjusting her seat belt. “Have you noticed how no one here says hello?”

Daniel nodded, intrigued, as he surveyed his passenger, trying to register her identity. There were still kibbutz members he couldn’t recognise out of context, but it was true what she said: even his work mates averted their eyes after hours.

That was the thing about this place, the way nobody ever said what they meant or looked at you, even, when they said it. And who am I, just one out of a thousand, he heard himself telling the stranger. Just an intruder who married one of their daughters. “I’ve been here a decade and still feel like that,” she confided.

The car sped past the cotton fields and they continued in silence for a time. What else did they have in common, apart from their status in this joyless place. They could have gone on, no doubt, about their loneliness or the regimentation of life, or the child care worker who let babies cry and then sang them chauvinist lullabies. They could have compared notes about Friday lunch sausages, reminding them of somebody else’s childhood. Instead, they chose to stay silent, and the woman with the unspoken history got out of the car at the school that crouched gray between date palms.

Date palms were everywhere here, belying the aridity of the soil. Some hi-tech irrigation system kept them fertile, tall and green, lining Harov’s communal chest. But even in the palms, Daniel only managed to see what was rancid. Frightening him with what he had become.

Daniel’s evenings had been much the same until recently. Nine p.m., his wife in bed already, he would pour himself the obligatory whiskey and go on the Internet. For a time, he had hoped to find someone to surf with, but this too turned out to be a solitary exercise. So evenings he would log on and join a chat line. Virtual human contact was better than none.
On the chat lines, Daniel became the self that he recognised. He found surfers in Russia and Bolivia and talked astrophysics, sitting up past midnight to explore the mysteries of the universe. Other times, he would seek out the disillusioned from home, trying to draw courage or optimism, injecting some meaning into the nightly charade on the TV news. Then he would shut down and take a nighttime stroll, past the look alike houses four-in-a-row, immersing himself in the dreams wafting by through the closed doors.

It was moonless, autumn breeze blowing, when everything changed: leaves falling to cover the finely chopped lawn, someone would have to rake them up the next day. It had been a depressing evening till then, filled with black holes and a diminishing universe and the prospect of chemical warfare.

This May Be A Strange Interlude, warned the posting. And Daniel had drawn in a breath and then pressed the computer key. It was just a computer, he said to himself reassuringly. They were only words.

That was when he met Trudy and began to understand what words could do. By the end of a one hour session he was exhausted, and wondered who the Bolivian had been talking to. And whether he was really Bolivian at all.

Next day he went to work with a smile that lay just through the surface. His universe had suddenly expanded, and he began to wonder about who was really around him. Any one of them could have been Trudy.

That night after his wife fell asleep he reopened the chat line and punched in his name.

Sigmund. He thought it might attract a particular type. Trudy, though, did not seem to be there. But Anais was. And the smile swelled to fill him from end to end.

Anais finished tapping her story onto the screen. Anais, Trudy, Dorit. Every night she would change her name, the men never did, so she was usually sure who they were. Lately it had been Sigmund. Her only worry was that maybe he was German, but she dismissed the thought: how many neo-nazis would have chosen a Jewish name. Anyway, his imperfect English seemed to have an Israeli lilt, the way he started sentences with the ending and swapped his adjectives with his nouns.

Sigmund was different somehow from her other virtual lovers. Unsure at first, untried, and he asked things about her; you could tell he was new at computer sex.
Anais took a look at her sleeping twins and her husband and then sat at the computer and logged on. He knew that she had Internet affairs, preferring them to the real ones he presumed she’d be having, otherwise. There was an emptiness that these evenings filled, a connection with the world that she did not have. One person didn’t seem to be giving her all that she needed.

The chat lines, though, were becoming addictive, leaving her spent and even emptier than before. The initial high of cybersex was becoming stale. Now, after all those lonely nights moving through superficial, sometimes demeaning encounters, she discovered that she was looking for something more permanent in her virtual life.

Daniel got a shock that night when Roberta got on his chat line. He’d been enjoying the idea of promiscuity so much that he seemed to crumple when she told him the truth about Trudy and Anais and Dorit. Words on a computer screen had rearranged his universe.

Daniel let his head fall into his hands, avoiding the screen like a woman’s face. He liked to think of himself as a moral man, a monogamous husband, and a little anonymous fun on a computer didn’t seem to impinge on this self-description. Not when he was free-floating among all of those women each night. But this was different. This was an affair with somebody tangible. This was something he would have to confess to his wife about.

Or would he? He knew she’d demand that he discontinue his evening escapades, it had always been clear to him who he’d married. And this Roberta woman was something amazing, she seemed to divine his whims. Just like Anais and Trudy and Dorit, all those faces to one body, he thought. How was he going to give this up?

There was a function that evening in the dining hall, where wall reliefs of the pioneers leapt out at you over your meal; Daniel’s wife had convinced him to go. He hated communal events here, no one spoke to him except for her family, and it was enough that he had to see them every Saturday for lunch. Daniel was a city man, was used to the mixture of anonymity and a chosen circle of friends. Here he had neither one.

His wife sat surrounded with childhood girlfriends, clutched so tight you couldn’t penetrate. “I’m going to sue the doctor,” he overheard, mulling past the charmed circle. “Six months of treatment, then I find out that my tubes are blocked!” All they ever talk about is babies, he thought, and fertility clinics. Artificial
insemination, and hormone shots and In-vitro – and then all those multiple births of babies who look like the doctor, he mused as prams of twins and triplets filed into the hall.

“All these offspring,” said a familiar voice. “Wonder if they’ll still be smiling in ten years from now.” Daniel felt grateful for the voice even before he turned to see it was her, the woman from the car. The one who was married to what’s his name, and he confessed that he’d forgotten what she was called, too. “Like all of that drip irrigation,” he managed to flash back at her, “as if nothing were meant to grow here.”

She remembered him, though, or his name at least, perhaps because he had just come up for a membership vote. Hadar, that’s right, he said to himself without studying her too closely. With all these changing identities, the names of real people were becoming quite blurred. Just then the music began – what festival was it, again? – and the audience separated and re-clustered, nuclear, to watch the sixth graders dance in the mounds of hay that gave Daniel hayfever.

Seven a.m. as usual, Daniel chugged out the gate to Harov in his Renault Express. A woman stood at the hitching post and he stopped, you had to of course, or you’d get worse from these people than no hellos. As he drew closer, he saw that it was Hadar again.

“So how are you coping here?” Hadar asked, rearranging her hair from the wind.

“I’m discovering ways of dealing with it,” he said with a sideways glance, trying not to look like he was staring. Hadar was wearing blue jeans and a crisp white shirt and she looked reasonably young, nothing over 40, wispy brown hair left long and straight. You could see from her face, too, that she hadn’t been born to the rural lifestyle; or maybe she was younger than he thought.

“So what is it you do to stay sane?” she asked. Daniel dismissed his paranoia mid-thought. Just like the conviction he’d had on arriving here: that it was only him that they didn’t acknowledge, that everyone else said hello to each other. That he was invisible.

“I go on the Internet,” he told her, “I walk a lot, too. Evenings. I like Harov best when everyone’s asleep.”

“Really.” Hadar pursed her lips. “You know I have this friend who does virtual sex. Have you ever heard of it?”

Daniel nearly swerved off the road.
“She’s got all of these ‘boyfriends.’ They don’t know her name of course. I think it would be frightening.”

Jesus, he thought, relaxing. She was just making conversation.

“I’ve heard about it,” he answered, “You’d just never know who you were getting, really, on the other end. And you could get addicted, I mean, things might happen that you couldn’t predict.”

By now they had already reached the entrance to the school. “Daniel, are you coming past this way home? Maybe you could pick me up.”

“Around lunch time OK?” he asked her.

“Maybe we could get a bite then across the road, I couldn’t stand another one of those sausage meals.”

“Seems we have something in common, “ Daniel agreed.

Lunch that day was different from any he’d had. There was something about this Hadar, how she seemed to like him straight off, and the way she kind of fell into her chair and her hair went everywhere. He liked her hair. And her face, and the rest of her, but there was something about the way she pursed her lips that got him. Shit, he thought. This is even worse than the computer.

That night his wife didn’t go to bed early.

“How are the black holes looking from Bolivia?” she asked. “Oh, fine,” he replied, which seemed to make her suspicious because he always did like to go on about the blackness of those holes. “I’d like to meet who you’re talking to,” she went on, “let’s get on the Internet.”

Daniel turned the computer on and tried to decide. He had hoped for so long for her to get up one evening and share something of his interests – politics, astronomy, anything, really that would give them a break from talking work or kibbutz or the fact that she couldn’t get pregnant. Maybe that’s what had done it, ruined their sex life and sent her to bed so early all of the time. The way that sex had become a means to an end that wasn’t happening. The way that he felt, deep down. That if it wasn’t getting her pregnant then there was almost no point. That somewhere he had been cheated.

They never said any of this, though, they just kept at their fertility program and the hormone injections that puffed her up even more than she was and tired her out and blurred all her features, somehow. If Daniel had let her know what he actually felt it would cause her more pain.
"Hey, what’s this?” asked his wife as she clicked on the bookmark. “So this is what you’ve been up at,” she smiled, logging on to the chat line and typing a pseudonym.

Daniel froze. He felt guilty, ashamed and stupid all at once. Most of all, though, he was in shock, as his wife started communicating with some anonymous woman: she had typed in a male name. “I think I’ll go for a walk,” he suggested.

Anais was puzzled at this new male who had crossed her path, it was that time of night when she usually met Sigmund. Hermes, though, was a surprising one. She was unused to that kind of forthrightness, her men all seemed to wait for her to set the tone. There was something more sensual and provocative in the way that this man made love, as if he already knew her intimately. For once, she abandoned her personas and her foreign objects.

It was close to midnight and the moon was full. Daniel was wandering aimlessly, when he found himself outside Hadar’s house. From the window he saw a blue light flickering, then heard a baby cry. What was he doing here? It wasn’t even his usual route: past the peach grove, then out to the fields where the fish ponds reflected the sky.

Hadar must have felt his presence there, because it was cool that night, and she came out dressing-gowned, twin in each arm. “Are you OK?” she asked, as if she expected to see him. “Sure,” he faltered, watching her stand there awhile, smiling; if he’d been Christian he would have said Mary, white and baby-filled. And then she was gone.

It was late when he returned, and he could see that his wife was still on the computer. As he came in, she typed a few words and then turned it off. “I met your girlfriend,” she said to him. “I liked her a lot.” Daniel smiled.

From his car in the morning he saw a woman at the hitching post. But before he had a chance to stop, someone else had swerved in front of him to pick her up.
I really can't say that I know why I hit her. I mean, it's not like I'd ever hit someone before – not since that time with my sister. Hairy scene it was, too, what with Doris tipping hot icing over the baby, even though she said it was an accident.

Still, it wasn't a punch or even a hard smack, didn't make any sound my hand coming down on her head like that. Afterwards she was so quiet that for a second there I thought I'd found the way to shut her up. That Doris just can't shut her trap, always at me about things that aren't her business. But anyway, I got real scared when she didn't talk, just not like her, all that silence going on in the house. Baby Joanie got a bit upset herself, though it turned out the icing wasn't really hot; but when little Jimmy got wind of it he just picked up his spindly white legs and he made for the neighbour's house.

One good thing about coming back to this kibbutz is the neighbourhood. You know, when Doris just got up like that one day, face more sour than a lemon and saying she had to get out of here, I was prepared to do just what she said. I admit I was pretty sad to see the house go, and the kittens, and Jimmy's friends who he doesn't quite seem to be making back. But I'm an easygoing kind of bloke and I got used to doing what Doris says without a fight. She's such a hot bitch when she gets going, even though I reckon she only has the kids at heart when she shoots off like that about people, so I try not to mind her.

Going away was not so bad, really, I went back and saw my sister and got into the footy again. Doris stayed home with J&J, making greeting cards and trying to sell cosmetics, except she didn't seem too good at that seeing so many babies had made her fat and shown up all those pock-mark things on her face.

Me, I've never noticed Doris was fat, not until this avo, really. To me she was always just big, in a good way you know. Maybe that's even what I liked about her, she always knew things, and me, I was just good with my hands. Horny like anything, though, when I met her, just one walking hard-on that was me. And then along came Miss Big Brown Doris into my life and I just slid in and stayed there, it seems to me...
now. Just all swallowed up, no light of day or night and then vooom, there I was
suddenly. All spat out again and not good for anything anymore.

And then she brought me back here. Not enough shame in going, have to make it
double coming back. Have to make it triple telling me what to do all the time, so the
neighbours hear everything. And I thought I was doing real good with this new
chicken job, packet of money and I know the work. Signed all the documents and
given my word and set a date to get started. But Doris screams when I come home and
tell her. "What, you working with that pig-faced bastard that threatened to burn down
our house/ That tells everyone you steal chickens in the light of day/ man you are a
lousy slack-arsed spineless jelly snake like they sell in that corner shop," except it
didn't stop like that. Then this fat pock-faced bitch starts throwing food around the
house. Splatt goes the flour for the cake right onto the kitchen wall I just painted.
Butter all over the telephone, new Panasonic brand from Singapore, opened the box
last weekend. And then the chocolate. I just love chocolate icing, and there it went,
steamy and slithering all over baby Joanie, like an innocent puppy that one is.

I don't claim that Doris deserved to get hit. Me, I got pretty much of a shock and
just did what she told me after that. Cancelled the contract right there and then,
cancelled the pub night, took out the garbage and cleaned up the chocolate off of the
floor. Shit. I tell you what though. Doris just isn't that same Doris that she was
anymore. Got smaller somehow, like one of those chickens in a cage. You look at
them running around and you'd be sure they were three kilo jobs. Get 'em into a cage
and chop their beaks off – down to two fifty, max, not even a day gone.
Other people, they have lives. That’s what I think when they drive past me at the gate, waiting for me to push the button that will let them out or in.

The lake is lit before I go to bed, it’s autumn and the red sun heaves itself over the mountain for a better view. Otherwise I’d feel invisible.

I have a name, but I don’t like to use it in the nighttime when it’s like I’m someone else. A shadow of the man I could have been.

The place I’m guarding is too small and what I’m watching for is larger than I want to think about. Even when I’m bored and wish something would happen, I don’t ever wish for that. Down the road, a watchman got hacked up last winter with an axe. Didn’t have a gun. It makes no sense, but most of the kibbutz watchmen and women don’t have guns, we stand or sit inside our little guard boxes and try not to look like we’re sitting ducks for terrorists or thieves. A gun would make it worse. Make us a target, waiting for a madman looking out to steal it.

I’ve known the people in this small kibbutz for half my life, they wave and smile as they go past and into lives that I can only dream of. Sometimes I’ll see things that I can’t tell about: Aaron being dropped off where he won’t be seen, another man inside the wine-red car with flashy headlights. Eva coming home each day at dawn, escorted by a different man. No one ever asks me not to tell, but that’s the only consolation this job has, the only way to feeling some importance.

Eva is the only one who stops sometimes as she drives out, the early edge of midnight. It’s the time I’m most awake, and so I always go up to the window of the car. Eva always smiles. She knows I keep her secrets; perhaps she knows I wish that I was one of them.

Before I came to this small place I lived above a pawn shop in New Zealand in a rented flat. I didn’t have a job, and so I’d go downstairs and sell stuff that I’d collected, until all I had left was a phone book and a bean chair and enough two-minute noodles to stay fed. And my red Gibson guitar, but that I wasn’t selling. So I threw some old clothes in a bag and took the guitar and got on a plane. One-way
ticket with the proceeds of my other two guitars, and then I took the free bus from the airport all the way up north and landed here.

It was a real kibbutz then. That meant you gave them all you could and took the things you needed, and at night the Swedish volunteers came out in skimpy clothes. It was easy for me, I got in the flow of getting by and doing everything that I was told. My name was taped to a magnet on the work-roster inside the mail room, moved each evening to the place I’d work, and mornings the night-watchman came to the door of my room to wake me. Sundays – factory, putting the springs inside of rubber seals. Mondays – hothouse. Night time – Swedish volunteers, and twice a week the pub was open and I’d have too many beers, if there’s such a thing, and then go out and pick up chickens when the magnet told me that’s what I should do. I lived on 60 shekels a month and got a haircut free, and bus tickets, and meals three times a day and laundry done.

I met Amy one of those work-nights when she stepped on a chicken by mistake and squashed its guts out. And started to cry. I’d seen her a few times before, in her garden with a guitar, singing. That night I rushed across the chicken house to be the first one with my arm around her, wiping tears.

A year later, we married. Then one kid, then two, and then she couldn’t take it any longer. I’d become a fat pig eating all that fried food in the dining room, and never cleaned the house, and new men had arrived – younger, smarter, prettier. And I was thrown out of the sweet-smelling house she’d made for us and started living like I used to. Bean chair. Phone book. Two-minute noodles – there was no dining room by then. There were no Swedish volunteers once the country had started to backslide and the tourists got blown up on buses and in cafés and all those soldiers filled the streets and searched your shopping bags.

Going on for twenty years I’ve been here and everything has changed. I have to cook all my own meals and pay for everything and earn a wage or there isn’t even one shekel that I’ll get given. There’s not even reserve duty now that I’m past the age. Forty-three last week. There’s younger men now for that as well.

That was one thing I liked doing: going out with my mates to a hilltop to watch the Syrians, who never moved. I got let out of active duty early on because of a bad back that started playing up, and now the army doesn’t even want me. I miss it, the blokes like me pulled out of normal lives one month a year, and no one cared how fat
I was or if I had a shower once a day. There were no lives happening there. Just Syrians across the border, watching us with binoculars while we were watching them.

Becoming a watchman was easy. Offered to me on a plate with good money for doing almost nothing. The days were gone when everyone in the kibbutz took turns at guarding, now they all had jobs to go to.

Ever since the day they pulled the magnets off the mail-room wall and binned them, other people’s lives had grown and grown. They’d built on to their houses and their kids learnt ballet and piano and in summer they all went to Disneyland in Paris or on island cruises to escape the heat.

Different people get dealt different hands in life, like in a game of blackjack, random chance. One got dealt out looks and brains and money; another got enthusiasm, sense of humour, boyish smile. Me, I got the worst of it. I don’t see opportunities. I wait until they pass me by.

It’s just this side of midnight and Eva is driving past. She’s still got her old Subaru, hasn’t washed it, early autumn rains have left dust blotches on her windscreen and her wipers must not work.

Eva is mysterious and sexy. That’s how I’d describe her. Not young, not beautiful, but once she was and she still carries herself like she used to twenty years ago.

“Hey,” she says, stopping the car, her window down, and I step out of the small guard box onto the road, not opening the gate, yet.

“Where are you off to?” I ask her. I never ask that.

“You want to come?” she says, not saying where she’s going to.

“I have to guard. I’m on till six.”

“But no one ever comes here. When was the last time you stopped terrorists or thieves? Come on,” she says. “Just leave the gate on automatic like you do on Fridays.”

I like it when Eva’s pushy, maybe that’s been my downfall in life, I like it when another person takes control. Eva knows what she wants, and she is on a straight path out to get it, so I don’t stand in her way. It’s not as if I’m on an army base and Syrians will suddenly run up the hill to massacre our sleeping children.
“OK,” I say and lock the little guard box, closing the wide yellow gate that spans the road to the kibbutz – you can open it with a cellphone if you know the number.

“What will I need?” I ask, I have no money on me.

“Just yourself,” she says.

Below the kibbutz, the lake has risen up to meet its banks. “Where are you going, Eva?” I ask her, imagining a pub, a slow dance, just a beer perhaps, but she surprises me.

“The lake,” she says, veering off the road to follow winding dirt tracks round the northern side: past the churches and the half-built promenade for the millenium, and the places for watching Jesus if he comes again.

She stops the car, it’s a full moon and breath-stopping stars spread out above us. “The Innuit imagined the night sky as a dark blanket spread across the sun, with moth-holes eaten in it,” Eva says. The stars.

I take a joint out that I’d brought to keep me going in that little guard box, and she has a toke.

“I’m going to die,” she says.

Some mornings I’m awake and I don’t even look at how the day changes from black to grey to colour. It takes about an hour, from darkness into light, it’s because of the mountain, Mt. Havakook.

Because of the mountain, the day is light before you see the sun. There are pink flashes of colour near the mountain’s peak, and then suddenly there’s gold, but you can’t see the ball of sun rising because you’re blinded.

Eva says she’s started staying up all night, to watch the stars swap places and the moon make pathways on the lake, and then the sun; from on the lake it rises faster. Here, across the flat, water horizon it’s as if the world is being born.

I’ve always liked Eva. She was already on the kibbutz twenty years ago when I arrived, and I noticed her straight away. I even felt like there was some kind of attraction between us; and that she was out of my league. At meetings she always had an opinion, and when she spoke everyone listened. She had all kinds of important jobs, as well, positions of power. Then about eight years ago, she disappeared. Not physically, but it was as if she had fallen off the edge, and gone to live some secret life. It was about the same time that things were changing here, and so no one kept
tabs on what you did, and Eva would appear sometimes at a communal meal and that was all I saw of her. She might have had lovers, but no one ever knew, at least I didn’t. No husband, though; no children.

Eva says she’s diagnosed with something rare whose symptoms might never appear, the doctors were sure she’d be dead by now but she defied them. "It could get me at any time, no warning," she says, and I say "Isn’t that like everyone?" but that’s not how I feel.

And then she kisses me, and I realise how long it’s been since I’ve touched a woman. But that’s all we do. The sun is coming up, the lake is fully lit and she is kissing me and then she stops and we keep talking. I feel I’m being drawn into her world and that I can’t resist the tug.

The next night Eva drives by, she is like a light in all this darkness. It’s almost two am and I’ve been sitting in the guard box without heating because otherwise I’ll fall asleep.

The guard box has been fitted next to the gate so that it faces the wrong way. I have a perfect view of the cars that drive out, but I can’t see who’s coming in. "Welcome", the sign says as you’re driving out of the kibbutz, as if the world has open arms. "Have a good journey", it says as you approach. As if this place is going to take you to somewhere you have never been.

Eva drives by the gate but only slows the car, blows a kiss through the half-open window and says "Hi sweetie," which is what you call four year-olds who’ve just smeared chocolate all over your couch, as in "don’t do that, sweetie." I feel a pit open up in my stomach, then. It’s as if last night had never happened.

The chicken house smells and the dogs bark all night. That’s what people argue about in the day, but I’m asleep so I think about other things. In the day, I dream while other people love and hate and get angry and get jealous. There are notices all over the mailroom about celebrations and meetings and building plans, and everywhere you look there are twos and threes of people in serious discussion about things that take their minds away from what is really happening. All of us approaching death at different speeds. It’s far enough away so that it doesn’t touch us deep if we are careful. Our cemetery’s empty, no one even knows where it is, just on a map somewhere inside a drawer.
The next night Eva doesn’t drive past at all, then Fridays I have off. In the few hours I’m awake and not working, I don’t run into her. The narrow paths we use don’t cross each other.

Friday nights I have my kids with me, the oldest girl just turned fifteen and pierced her eyebrow, dyed her long blonde hair jet-black, and put a dog-collar with spikes around her neck so no one can get near. The youngest daughter is the image of her mother: pretty, talkative and sweet. That’s scary in its own way. It’s strange to find myself a father to two teenage girls and no mother around, I had no sisters and I went to a boys’ high school, they still had those then. I’m not really sure how to do it properly, so I just do what I do best, I take a backseat when they’re over, play my music, read the books that I can’t concentrate on while I’m guarding. Let them fill my house up with their friends and answer when they talk to me.

This week, though, I’m more detached than usual. I keep reliving those few hours by the lake, the sunrise, Eva’s kiss. Her body touching mine under the blanket that she kept inside her car. I feel like a character out of one of those romance novels Amy always used to read and I’d make fun of, she said she never got the romance she needed from me.

Saturday night back in the guard box, I override the automatic function on the gate so that each driver has to stop and wait for me to let them through.

On Sunday she drives by again and I go to her window.

"Where you off to?" I ask, repeating the same words that worked magic the week before, and she says, right on cue, "you want to come?"

I set the gate to automatic, check again because I don’t want anybody getting stuck here and waiting till I’m back, or calling me. I get in the car but Eva doesn’t turn down the dirt track to the lake, she swings the car around at the main road. "Along the Northern Road there’s snow, let’s go see it," she tells me without asking. After all, it’s her who’s at the wheel.

It’s turning into winter, but where we live it never snows, the winds get arctic and the skies turn grey but there’s no compensation.

"It’s like an artists’ brush has swept along the roadside, leaving thin highlights of white," she says. "I wanted to be an artist, you know," and I say "No, I didn’t know that."
"I was always sure that I’d do something special," Eva says, "But I got so caught up in this kibbutz thing. It’s only now that I can paint."

"This kibbutz thing is what saved me from the failure of my stupid dreams," I tell her. "I was going to be a lead guitarist. Sing. Maybe I had talent, but I didn’t have the ambition to make it work."

"In the end, being ambitious is the same as having no ambition at all," she says, "It just takes longer till you feel like you’ve failed."

She stops talking and I wait until she gets going again.

"I’ve just redefined success," she laughs. "But I still want too much."

I never want enough. Except for when it comes to her.

We’ve driven right to the end of the Northern Road, where the mountains dip down to the sea. There’s a wood cabin with lights on at the intersection, you can see the lights from here.

"Let’s stop. They have a log fire and hot spiced wine."

Eva parks the car, and opens the boot and takes out a canvas. "Let’s go in."

It’s two am and the little log cabin is almost full, there’s a jazz band playing, and she sits me down at an empty table and takes the canvas over to the bloke behind the bar. He takes it from her and gives her a hug, and leans it up against the wall. "You’re getting better all the time," he says. "Which one are you taking back?" Eva goes behind the bar and pulls a canvas off the wall, hangs the new one there instead. I look around and notice there are half a dozen paintings hung around the cabin. All faces.

Some of them I recognise. "They yours?" I ask her.

"This is where I keep the ones I like the best. Sometimes someone wants to buy, but I don’t like to sell them anymore. I can’t let go of them."

The jazz band gets better the more I drink, they’re playing old standards and the trumpet player’s great, he must be pushing sixty but he looks 30 years younger when he plays. After the set he comes across to us and Eva introduces me.

"He sings," she tells him, tilting her head across at me.

"Only in English," I say, hoping that this moment will pass by me, but that’s not the way it happens.

"Come on up with us next set," the trumpet player says. "We’ll do some blues."

When I sing, the music stops me caring what anyone thinks, but I can’t remember the last time I did it. Reserve duty, maybe. At night when no one hears.
The band starts up again, they’re playing that old Cab Calloway number he sang in the Blues Brothers, I’ve seen it so many times I know the dialogue as well as the lyrics to every song. "You know this one?" he asks me over the mike, and I feel myself stand up and move across the floor. "What’s your name again?" he asks me with his hand over the microphone.

"Robert," I say.
"Robert what?"
"Goldman."

The trumpet player introduces all the band members by name, and then he says "on vocals: Bobby Mann," and I don’t recognise myself but I am up there, and then I’m singing and my legs are loose from alcohol and my voice is too.

It’s almost five-thirty when we drive back up the road to home, and Eva stops the car a bit before the gate and puts the handbrake on, and slides the gears to neutral. Then she kisses me, the first time that we’ve touched all night, and then she lets me out at the guard box just before the mango guy comes past. I let him open up the gate himself and wave him by.

The next time Eva drives past I go stop her at the gate while it’s still sliding open. Once, at the kibbutz just down the road, I watched a guy’s face get jammed up in one of these. But I know to be careful.

I stop her car at the gate before it’s opened all the way, it feels as if I’ve grabbed the side mirror and held her back. "I want to go to that jazz place again. Are you going there?" I say.

"I’ve got other plans, but come along."

"Next time. You let me know," I say, I’m not even sure that it’s me talking. It sounds like someone else. Bobby Mann, perhaps. Perhaps that’s how he’d talk to a woman, as if there are so many after him that he can choose.

There was a guy like that here once. We called him The Magnet and not one of us could understand it. In everything else he did, this bloke was ordinary. He was good looking, that’s true. And people liked him. But he knew that women wanted him. That was his edge.

That’s how I am tonight with Eva.

"You know what, let’s go there," she says, like she may never have another chance to be with me, and Bobby Mann says "Fine." Like he deserves to be there.
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The Arousing
Painting Angel

If I could, I'd keep painting this body: that is my first thought upon waking and seeing her. The light cups her breasts and the curve of her belly lifts and falls with her dreaming.

In the mornings I don’t like to wake her, and when I do it is lightly, so she is barely awake when I enter her, moving softly as I push her out sleep.

I am losing the urge to transfer her onto the page, I think as she leaves the room, wordless, gone before I have wiped her from my eyes. Sometimes the day can go on like that until evening when she returns; neither of us using words at all.

In the mornings I try to paint, but it has dried in me, the colours gone hard and muted and stale. After that first touch of morning goes, and she does, I am left so empty and dark that I barely can lift myself.

The bedroom faces east where the sun rises and sea spray splashes some distant shore: not mine. The house has been whitewashed and salt air eats at its innards, but I leave the walls empty and just paint the window frames, so to not lose my touch: the action of paint onto brushes, the movement of striking hard, real surfaces.

Mornings, after my coffee and bacon and eggs, I take my walk past the lower end of town, down the cobblestone streets to the wharf. It’s a harbour town, no beaches here, just old motels on the water’s edge and low, crumbling wharves pointing out to sea, as if we have lost something there.

I take my paper with me, in a satchel over my back, and some pens. Never an easel. That would be presumptuous, and then the people would stop to watch me work and they would want to believe that I might progress. That I might produce something.

This way, I am always left alone. I take up a bench by the waters’ edge and sometimes a drunk whose night I have interrupted looks at me expectantly, and I give him a couple of coins for a look at his view.
Some days, I just sit and watch the small wisps of spray and the harbour, wrinkled and flat like an old man’s hand. The sea always feels like that to me, as if it witnessed everything.

But the sea is swelled today with expectancy and my pens can’t resist the pull of something new. The skies darken early for this time of year, and fishing boats and tourist ones shuffle for place at the rotting wharf, as if some thing is about to happen and I am swept up in that idea, too, rushing to get it down on the page.

When I work, I work quickly. My movements are deft and sure, until something I haven’t imagined appears on the page. When I sit here on this bench, I lose myself into the sea. It is probably the closest thing I ever feel to happiness.

Angel comes home from the bakery at half past five every evening and brings fresh bread. She has the body of a person who ought to bake, sweet and full as if yeast has been added to her.

“Will you paint me today?” she asks. She asks me every day, now, she’s expectant and she knows something I am not yet aware of.

For weeks, now, I have thrown all my drawings away.

Angel can’t understand it. It makes her want to cry, but she doesn’t. She never does.

Angel knows what she has to do to keep me here. It makes me feel grateful to her, and sad for her as well.

I met her at the wharf many months ago, she stood out among the market women and fishwives and the sailors’ girls.

“Do you only draw boats?” she asked, “And people from so far away? They are so small, and they have no faces,” she had said.

She had a strange way of speaking that I began to adopt after a while, a sparing way with her inflections, some mix of accents and lives I’d never seen.

“Have you never drawn a person very close up?” she asked me.

“A portrait, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I would like to do yours,” I said, although portraits really weren’t what I liked, they meant sitting close to someone for hours. You needed something to say and most
people speak garbage and I want to paint them with open cans of sardines and radishes from their mouths. And I hate not to draw what I see. It feels like lying.

"I will draw you," I said, "but it must be here and now. I don't know if the next time I see you I'll have the desire."

"Desire?" she said, but it wasn't a question. She understood.

I liked the way that she understood things so silently. She didn't use a lot of words, just enough to make it clear what she meant. And there was a largeness in her heart, as if it could open up to contain all things, and I was one of them.

There are some things you would like to imprint forever, write them or keep the negative. The first time with Angel was like that, and it made me paint, conjured up colours in front of my eyes that I didn't know could be there. There was something in the way that the light caught her, so that she seemed almost transparent, blown like glass.

You can steal people's images, take away a part of the infinity of their soul when you put them down on a page. Even when you paint them again and again.

Painting a person – and perhaps it is the same with writing them down – is to take away a part of them forever. The part of them that is free, because the soul pulls back, always, from being defined.

It is like naming love.

I love the feel of paint under my nails, when the turpentine is dry and all I have is kitchen oil. I put it in an old can for vegetables and I dip my brushes in and all the hardness goes.

The first time, I lay Angel out on a sofa bed in my room, there is only one; one room, one kitchen that leads into it where I keep my paints and my canvasses. That's all.

I don't undress her at first, not the first time, I want her pure and white like her name and I paint her just as she is: all the folds of her clothes and the fullness of her breasts, the angled hips, and the white of thigh dusted with flour where her skirt lifts itself.

Later, when she is here on this sofa bed, naked, once she is mine, the edges of her will spread, so that something dark will seem to haunt her.
The later paintings, though, are better than the first, her body seemed perfect, then. Later it would take on a depth that only sadness brings.

There’s a roundness in her voice that soothes me to sleep at night, and the heat in the palms of her hands. It’s as if she has powers in them, to keep me here next to her, she warms my body and folds herself into me so the heat of her cradles my sleep.

I will never want this woman to go, I think.

In the night, I dream about love dying, the word appears and then falls from my lips like something rotten.

I tell Angel that being in love is not a thing I aspire to. “It only lasts six months at most,” I proclaim, as if I’d know.

“It is love though, isn’t it?” she asks me, as if there is something she needs to know about me, about her, perhaps, and I answer her with what I believe. “Yes,” I say. “It’s love.”

I love Angel. I loved her. I never say it, but once, I am sure that I did. When she smiled, the blue in her eyes would meld with the sky, like they covered the world.

Then, I painted everything in blue, as if I was seeing through them.

Now, I would go back over those times and paintings and memories and recollect them differently. “That was love,” I would say.

But nothing is blue, now.

Not even the sea.

I dream at night about the sea. I wade in, up to my knees at first, and then I lose the will to keep my trousers dry, hoisted up almost to thick white thigh and I’m frightened but I let myself get pulled in by the tide until the waves are thrashing over me and I struggle to be free.

Suddenly, off another shore, I see Angel. The waves are pulling deep there, too, but Angel lies on her back, breasts and pelvis bobbing, and she isn’t scared.

At the wharf in the morning I sit down next to a drunk, with a pen in my hand. I have started to draw in pen, now, once it was only pencil or paint, but pen you can’t change, it comes out as it is, you can’t censor yourself, all the muck that’s dredged up out of the sea. And anyway, they are pictures I will throw away.
That evening, I leave the house at ten, when Angel has pulled back the starched white sheets and made her bed, in the too-soft mattress that carries the imprint of her smell.

Some days, I cannot sense her smell at all, one of my senses is missing, it’s like a silent movie: I feel her textures, I see her. But smell – and taste, I imagine, too – have become indistinct and blurred, mixed in with turpentine from my old tunics and salt from the sea.

It’s evening, I never go out this late alone anymore, it’s the hour of drunkards and dealers and prostitutes. Perhaps that’s what I need. Something to take me away from the whiteness of my existence, the walls that are empty, the easel hardened with unused paint. The perfect woman in my bed who has no smell.

The road down to the harbour is cobbled, I slip on the shiny, worn stones in some places, regaining my balance each time. At the boardwalk next to the harbour I can hear snippets of conversation, and the smell of whiskey and beer mixed with perfume.

A woman approaches me.

“Hey, sailor,” she says. In this light I can barely see her face, but I like her breasts, and her voice, I am struck by them as if the rest of her is irrelevant. “Have a drink with me?” she asks, and I know what she’s asking, but right now we’re just at the drinks stage, and anyway, for the price of a drink I would rather not be alone.

We go through the wood-glass door into the bar, she winks at the barman and takes a seat on a stool where I can see her legs.

“I’m Amelia,” she says.

“What’s your real name?”

“June. What’s yours?”

“I don’t have a name. Not tonight. Who do you want me to be?”

“That’s my line,” she says, but I tell her that’s not what I’m looking for, if there’s any point to being here at all, it’s to know who she really is.

“And then I bet you won’t want to pay for it,” she says.

I don’t want to be myself tonight, that way I won’t have to think about Angel or not being able to paint or my dreams of the sea. I want this woman, I want to be overwhelmed by her and have her leave the same day.

She looks at me like she knows what I’m thinking, and takes my hand, roughly, off the drink. “Come on,” she says, and takes me up the stairs. “I think I could even
enjoy this one,” and I imagine her saying this over and over again on the same flight of stairs, swilling her hips and rubbing her red lips together, but right now I couldn’t care.

We get inside the door. The room is not quite dark, the colour of her lips in this light. I push her against the wall and I start to grind into her, I can feel the opening of her flesh through my clothes and hers, but I won’t undress her, not yet. I start to move my hands under her shirt, but she pulls them back and pins them in front of her, like she’s fighting me. “That’s how you like it, isn’t it?” she whispers, it’s a taunting voice, and I move my hands to hold her, hard, pulling her skirt away till I’m deep inside her, lifted up on me and off the floor. And she’s calling out all the time, “no, you have to go now, no,” and she’s breathing hard and her legs are raised right up to let me in.

We’re still against the wall, her pinned to me, when I ask.

“June, can I paint you?”

Ruth Lacey
The little mermaid passes the place that takes her to the other side of waves. That is where she finds him, her man in the statue. That is when she knows she will have to be changed.

The sea was blue today.

The sea is always some shade of blue, that is its misfortune, I suppose.

Today, though, it seemed more melancholy than usual, and barely a ripple on the surface. That was how I knew that there was a storm to come.

As usual, though, I was not at all taken seriously by my palace advisors. Amelia was the most obstinate of them, wielding that hard leather briefcase as if it held something important. "You are a wimp of a man, sometimes," she smiled at me, going for the exposed underbelly. "Well, alright then," I said, as newspaper headlines saying "Wimp" flashed up before my eyes, obscuring the waveless shoreline.

But the sea was that soft unprotected blue which invited danger.

It was my birthday. That's what all this fuss was about, not the determining of state policy, not even royal protocol. These were privileges I had learnt not to expect any longer, being a prince is not what it used to be. Still, I felt that I should at least be able to decide about my own birthday; and here I was, still bowing to Amelia and my mother and my god knows who else any more.

We set out on the cruise, all of the royal entourage, even the bodyguards. It was a hot windy night, not unlike the hamsin storms in Arabia. That was when everyone, the nomads and merchants and seafarers, all of them knew there were flash floods to come and hail, littering the desert mounds with ice. These people, however, have spent centuries blunting their senses. That is what makes them attract tragedy.

It was midnight when the wind changed and I could smell the blue, now, deep violet
bursting into my dreams. I was not quite asleep when the colours changed, turning
easterly and ominous and I did not hesitate, neglecting to put on my dressing gown,
for it was only a matter of minutes before it would hit.

After that the sky turned starless, the sea grew swollen and green. Crashing the
wood of the deck into bite-size pieces, swallowing whole, plunging its victims
downwards with angry force.

And I with them, lost in the twilight that cut between skyline and underworld.

That was when I felt it, caught on the seam. Sweet singing that seemed to rise
from the depths, tugging from the other side and I knew that I was lost now to the
earth. Arms soft and melodious wrapped around me, warm, and I took water into my
nostrils and breathed, skimming the ocean floor with the fish.

I was on the beach and I was shivering. My clothes were torn and wet and I sat up in
the edge of the moonlight. The light was starry and shadowed and the half-body of a
woman seemed to enter the sea which was calm, now, but when I looked again there
was only the swish of a tail. Then Amelia appeared.

Amelia took me quietly in her arms and helped me back to the palace. It was the
first awareness I’d had of her physical strength and her height as she drew me up to
her and willed me to walk.

Her will was that other thing I had scarce paid attention to, mistaking it for
personal ambition and low-mindedness. Now I began to see her grounded self and the
forthright way that she negotiated the world.

Amelia put me to bed. She was the only other survivor, courtiers and advisors
and even servants all relegated to the jealous depths. We approached the palace from
the sea entrance, rambling up the wide marble steps that stretched longways onto the
beach. Amelia delivered me gently to my room and brought me a cognac, stripped off
my wet clothes and laid me soft in the warmth of my oriental four poster that retained
the scent of mahogany.

Next morning she was there again, and she looked worn. “How is the handsome
prince?” she asked, but for once I heard nothing of her usual sarcasm. And so it was,
Amelia reduced to my valet and cook as I gained my strength, no press conferences,
no galas, no ribbon cutting dates to intrude on the prince’s recuperation.

The weeks passed slowly and sweet in an almost tempting way. Soon, Amelia
had employed a new batch of servants and distant relatives began to spend short
visits, requiring dinners and evenings drinking port. Spring came around again and soon I had mustered the courage to enter the sea once more, as I always had, wandering the shore and feeling the warm ocean lap at me, strengthening.

It was on one of these perfect days when I saw her first. I hadn’t noticed anyone on the beach before, I must have dozed for a time in the sunshine because all I remember was watching her emerge from the sea that was indigo and assured that day.

The woman didn’t speak and we named her Blue. Perhaps it was that vague association she roused, the lingering fear that she would someday be reclaimed.

Blue was beautiful like the sea, soft and bursting with life. Her eyes were the colour of cobalt. Her silence put Amelia in awe. She was uncontainable.

Words were unnecessary with Blue. She became part of my hidden life in the palace, that part that did not reveal itself to the media or the visitors over port in the drawing room, and she barely ate. Our staple of seafood repulsed her, so that sometimes she would leave the table horrified by some act of barbarity no one else could perceive. Daytime I would lounge with her in the sunshine or ride, and in the forest animals ate from her hands.

“She’s in love with you,” said Amelia one day. “You will have to decide what to do or she will be ruined.”

That was the first time I had heard Amelia speak of love. For soon after the tragedy Amelia had returned to her work with peculiar vengeance. As if returning to battle with herself over some past misdeed.

Or weakness. For Amelia was in love with me too, in her way. I do not say this with any hint of self-importance, one of my lesser character flaws. I had never been in love, and only once had I approached the intensity of feeling which romances seem to hint at or describe. That night in the ocean. Clear and blue and light where I could hear the ocean floor and touch music.

I waited for that feeling to overwhelm me again, and I would not allow myself to surrender until I was sure. Amelia cut herself off from me and organised more and bigger galas, so that the palace became a hunting ground and I a subject of speculation in gossip columns again. Blue retreated in the night time folly, wandering the beaches and weeping noiselessly, emptying my heart. “You must decide,” Amelia said, her
handprint on my brow, still. Amelia who could talk and move in the world, pulling me earthbound when I had almost died.

One still night Blue came to me in a dream. I was sleeping and she came into my bed, I could only see the outline of her, it was moonless and she smelt like fresh sea. I knew it was a dream, then, because she had never done anything like this, and I had resisted my impulses; to touch her would just bring pain.

Then I saw that she was holding a knife.

"Kill him or you will die," I heard, voices that seemed formless, but even in the dream I was not afraid. "It was me," she whispered softly and took the knife, tossing it from the window facing the beach front.

Then I heard it again. The song that had wakened me from my death, she was singing it but her lips did not move. I tried to wake myself but she turned towards the open window and I watched helplessly as the wind swept her out to the sea.

In the morning Blue was gone and the ocean was cobalt. When I heard of her leaving I ran, first thing, to the beach near my window and searched the surf. A silver-edged knife lay on the sea shore and I touched my hand to the foam. The water tasted of tears.

It was in January that I married Amelia, taller than me and more regal, Princess now. The snow fell hot and melted on her cheeks during the ceremony and voices raised themselves out of the choppy seas. Newspaper photographers and journalists and kings of Denmark and Spain were there, and the evening blazed with logwood fires and too much alcohol.

"My handsome prince," she smiled at me, and then took the arm of the king of Denmark, leading him onto the beach. "I bet this kingdom is worth a packet," I heard him say.
They live in the furthest house, you have to walk nearly half a mile to its rickety gate.

They had come to the village only a decade ago, and so no one could really say about their origins. He was a northerner, with an accent, and people felt they could venture to ask, no chances of in-breeding there. Scandinavian, they would say, and his tanned skin and the eyes that were the colour of aquamarine, touched by sunstroke some said, it must be the climate, and their children were always shades of red from the hole in the ozone layer, just about above our village, you’d say.

The village had started out small, built on the unmarked graves of all those dead natives and the wild dogs who they’d found when they came here. So it wasn’t really anything to brag about in the pub, to say you had been here, then – though they did of course – and then married your sister’s daughter to boot, producing all that single-eyebrowed stock that roamed the place. But the village was beautiful, four or five streets by now, rainforest trees and running streams just down the embankment. The houses were weatherboard, tucked in for winter rains and out for the summers and the tourists coming to haul themselves up our mountain, sloped treacherous and clothed in sequined green.

They live in the farthest house from me, though it isn’t very far, nothing compared to the bush tracks, sticky with resin this time of year, and the leeches inside the yellowbark and the mozzies by Rushing Joan Creek. A decade they’ve been here, keep to themselves, he has beehives, we call him Winnie because of the honey and he likes his things sweet. His wife we call Hon, short for honey, he calls her Angel and I can see how he got to that, but the kids all have proper names.

I don’t know how it started that I got interested in him, it couldn’t have been the bees.

When I think of it I think of fire, summer brush all dried up and waiting to ignite, some poor bugger just needs to let a stray match go and then up into flames, along with the stringybarks and the redgums. Like that, I imagine it.

It was a bush path covered with wait-a-while palms you make furniture from, accounts for all the rattan on our verandahs, though you can’t plunder the stuff anymore, regulations, poaching can cost you more than the store price. Just got past
the creek floodway, everything bending with the water flow, whole trees; that's the only way you can tell, and because of the shiny stones: it's bone dry now.

"Hey," he calls out from behind me on the path. We meet all the time but were never introduced – in the corner store, some nights in the pub, at the hitching post out of town going opposite ways. Hon teaches my brother's kids in school. But I've been away from the village for going on years.

"Going my way?" he asks, he has a heavy something in his voice, and it's gargly and fresh like dew. He rounds his mouth around the words and then leaves his lips there, half-opened, like he's got more to say but he's wondering, translating from Finnish or Dutch or Norwegian, maybe he won't say it right so he hesitates and looks like he's trying to get it out through his eyes. I suppose that it's like being deaf or blind, you compensate.

At the beginning we don't say much, I'm a talker usually, but there's this thing in his presence that silences me. He hasn't shaved for a day or two, bees are oblivious, and it makes the skin on his face look rough, like you'd want to touch it just to feel if it's prickly, looks like it wouldn't be; soft and blond like the rest, tied up loose down his back.

"You hungry?" he asks me, and I admit I really am, was counting on river water and berries, but Winnie gives me his flask and says that they've warned off the water this week, chemical plant in the village upstream, gets into the berry fibres, too, he says, so we seat ourselves on a mossy rock near the weeping bottlebrush, roots grey and mangled and keeping the creek floods at bay. Doesn't even come from here, and this Scandinavian bloke knows all the names of the flowers and the bugs, and just when the floodwaters will be high.

I wonder how it is that I got to be so cut off where I live, comes from spending so much of my life in the city, all that learning getting me nowhere, six months back here, now and I can't get work. Come back to the village and there's nothing here except bush tracks and cicadas on a rainy day. Nights I sit out on the wooden porch. I rented a place with a one of those colonial jobs, goes right around, so that daytime I can see the mountain right ahead, and the dirt roads by the entranceway. It's a wooden place, small and old but I've done it up nice, just two rooms and a fireplace and I cut back the weeds in the summer, fear of fires and snakes, but in wintertime I'll let it grow.
I miss the city, but I'm not heading back. It had ocean, the city, and theatre and lights that pierced you through on a bony night. I felt like anything could break the fine taut thread that was me, skin-peeled and held together with soluble glue. Like my shell was scraped off me: slowly and painfully, with a scalpel, so that I felt it all of the time.

I miss the city and I can’t find a job, but I don’t need one, meantime, luxury of family wealth. We don’t have classes, too small a place to go round dividing it up; except there’s the in-breeds, and anyone you say is one becomes it, sticking like honey to a bear’s paw.

The last six months I’ve noticed Winnie and noticed Hon, picked up on everything, honing in my lost senses, getting sharp again. I was a sharp kid, they used to say, small and lithe and brown, got in everywhere, and out, which was more important, and people were scared of me. Gave me respect, I knew how to win it, made me strong and adventurous. Knew every path up the mountain, never listened in school, they forgave me, must’ve been Mum the mayoress, or Dad who handed out loans, or maybe they just knew. Try to control me it wouldn’t get anywhere, and anyhow I always got the best grades, teachers used to copy my work and hand it out to the class; they needed my complicity and I would do anything to be just left alone.

I can’t say now how I got to be like that, but it caused me trouble in later life. Got too good at getting what I wanted and keeping the treasure-hunters from digging too deep. Plenty of them there were, then, too; but not anymore.

We sit on a mossy rock on the edge of the creek, next to that weeping bottlebrush, just past the wait-while palms. I love the names of the forest plants, they have stories in them and music with the wind brushing past, they’re better than chimes. Winnie takes a palm leaf, long and sharp one, and uses it for a knife without breaking the stem.

“You know I’ve never asked you where you’re from,” I say to him.

“You’ve never asked me anything at all,” he smiles, I’ve never seen him do that. Smile. Seems like he hasn’t had reason to.

“So, you answering, or is there a secret?”

“Norway,” he says to me, “and sure there is.”

Now this man has got me intrigued, knows just how to go about it, too. I try to think about Norway, but I haven’t even seen a map, for all my education I don’t have a clue where it is, who it’s bordered by, the people, the plants.
“What’s your secret?” I ask, I’m actually quite interested in where Norway is, but I can look that up in a book.

“What’s yours?” he answers, locking my eyes in his till there’s nothing but aquamarine in big pools. I think that perhaps that’s the start of it; I know how these things begin, but there’ve already been too many bushfires this season.

On the way down the mountain we talk about Norway a lot: he does, I just ask the questions. There’s snow there in wintertime, he used to ski, and fish in the rivers, you can break a hole in the surface and just drop your line in from the bank. He worked in a fishing town, moved around a lot, shipbuilding mostly, and other stuff he doesn’t say. It’s what he doesn’t say that I’m dying to know.

At the mountain summit is a slab of granite that looks like a whale’s jaw. No one has ever climbed there, it swallows its intruders whole, and rough stone crosses litter the forest beneath it. That’s where the strangler figs are, vice-gripping their hosts over Juniper Bay.

You can see Whale Jaw Point from the verandah, Juniper Bay in the distance and strangler figs, sometimes they come right up to the banisters, you have to cut them away, they cling on as if a piece of deadwood could give them life.

Sometimes that is how I feel.

He comes past my house at the end of the street, it’s only ten in the morning, I can see the heat rise in waves already, like off corrugated roofs, so that you can’t see exactly where the tin begins or ends. A kingfisher swoops up from the garden, black-eyed and pensive, shakes its sapphire coat and nuzzles its long black bill into my seedless grapes.

Winnie pulls over in the battered green pick-up next to my house, I’m out with the binoculars and a dictionary of birds and rainforest plants, bought it in the second-hand place on Eavesbury Street, mottled and brown from too long in the sun, looked like paperbark.

“Hey!” he calls from behind his glasses, I only see the way his lips get round the words. That accent. In the back of the pick-up are big slabs of fence, and he pulls his hair back into a knot with a rubber band as he gets out. “Come up,” I say.
He brings himself carefully into my world, the empty balcony over the place where
the road stops short and turns into rubble, up the steps hewn into rock like he’s done it
before. He sits on the old cane chair that’s unravelled in the sun, and I give him fresh
lemonade straight from my tree.

“So what do you do here all day?” he asks, looks me straight in the eye, doesn’t
make small talk.

“I watch things, I think a lot.”
“You in hiding?”
“Collecting myself,” I say, “I’ve got a little scattered.”

It isn’t hard to talk to him, he has a whole life I want to know about: where he
comes from, what he thinks, what happens to him when he walks through the gate of
his house; how he lives with the bees. I have the feeling that there’s something
precious in him, and wrenching. I want to know what it is.

“Look, I have to go,” he says suddenly, “Work, you know. But let’s talk some
more,” and his eyes flash, he’s promising something, I tell him to come past again
when he’s got time.

I go out into the garden and out past the ferns. Something about this Winnie
character has got me scared, it’s too powerful, the way that the start of his stories has
trapped me in my body, victim to sensations I thought I’d controlled. He tells me
about his childhood, I feel a stitch between my ribs; death and abandonment and
fjords that jut out into misty nothingness, numbing the heart until all that he believes
in is desire, only thing he can feel. “I want to know everything about you,” he says,
but I know what he means when he says that.

I push past the ferns and go out to the street where his car stood. It’s sunny and I
feel like molten wax. I walk down the scorching asphalt, didn’t put on shoes, I have to
run till I get to the store. Then I see her, Hon with her babies in tow, and my heart
leaps.

I understand why they call her honey, it isn’t just because of him. It’s everything
about her, her colours, the way she flows. She’s wearing a summer dress, the breeze
catches it and it clings; full breasts swaying while she moves, round hips that keep
pouring out life, long brown legs into sandals that tie with string. She sees me and
smiles, if I could melt any more then this is how it would feel.

She looks at me as though she can sense something, hands all the children to the
owner of the store, some distant relative, I suppose, and comes towards me.
“I’ve got the day off,” she says, there’s honey in her voice as well, “Would you like to come past for some tea?”

They’ve been living in this village for ten years, now, and I’ve never gotten past their gate, never much exchanged a word with either of them up till today; but I’m a believer in synchronicity, fate, horoscopes, tarot cards, everything so long as it doesn’t mention God, holds me firm when the pieces start juggling for control.

“Sure,” I say, and we leave the store and the children and nappies and prams and walk out to the street.

Their house is nothing like I’d expect it to be from the outside: inside it glows, like she does, varnished wood and warm peach walls, carpets with long heavy pile. The walls are hung with paintings of women. We drink herbal tea and sit in the bay window, “Winnie painted them,” she says, checking for what happens to me when she says his name.

I watch her now as she takes in my face and my body: thin and slight, suntanned dark like the natives, cropped hair. I must seem nervous, she reaches over to touch my face, there is heat in her hands. “You’re very beautiful,” she says.

“So are you.”

“I can see why he likes you.” She says it without any hint of envy, like she understands; I feel grateful but I don’t react, I’m too taken in with her.

“You look tense,” she says, and reaches over again, places her hands on my heart, brushing my breasts; hands that feel like they could heal.

“Would you like me to help you?” she asks.

She lies me down on the rug and she closes the blinds, stretches my body out, lifts off my shirt. From the mantelpiece above an empty fire place she brings out oils and incense, “Close your eyes,” she says, and she cradles my head in her hands, I can smell her, I feel like I’m being pulled into her womb. She moves her hands to my heart again, pulls out my arms, rubs oil over my nipples, my belly, her breasts hang over me; she moves to my side.

“Turn over,” she whispers, and starts to knead, “don’t say anything,” but I have nothing to say. She pulls down my panties, now, rolling my flesh, slides her hands between my legs, spreads out the wetness, digs in deep. “You’re very beautiful,” she says again; I still don’t move.
She covers me with a blanket and leaves the room. I drift into sleep and I wake to a house full of children, slip on my clothes to go. I’ve got as far as the doorway before I can focus again, turn to look at her, search out her smile. But she just nods distractedly and says goodbye.

The heat is burning me now and there’s nowhere to go.

The heat burns me, pulsates in between my bones, sucking dry flesh like the rain. It’s too hot to sit on the balcony, forty in the shade, and too exposed; I go to the second-hand store, buy a ceiling fan and bamboo blinds, fence myself in till there’s only a space for the view. Whale Jaw Hill with nobody climbing it, not even wild dogs in the sun.
需
Waiting
Fire Princess

The plane felt like it had been bought on the cheap from the former Soviet Union. “Latvian Airlines” had been painted over with not enough coats, replaced by “Long Air Charters.” When it took off and landed the lights went out and the man in the next seat squeezed my arm and said goodbye.

It’s my first exhibition back home in Australia, and I’m stopping on the way in Katmandu; I have an uncle there. “You need to travel, you keep dreaming about journeys,” says my therapist, I wonder why he wants me to leave after everything that’s happened.

But I go: into the darkness, no lover, no therapist, no pets. My uncle writes: “Don’t come if it’s before eight in the morning or after midnight.” When we land, I squeeze the man’s arm. He doesn’t complain.

Katmandu. What is a man in his fifties doing here? I wait until nine to be sure he’s there, and then climb the narrow wooden stairs from the café with the omelettes and baked beans on toast.

My uncle is a large man, and hairy and uncouth. I knock on the door and find him still in bed. “Jesus, Mary,” he says in his bellowing voice, and throws off the bedclothes. I feel ragged and small and fragile next to him, I haven’t slept in days and I just hope he’ll offer me something – anything – and make me feel at home.

“You’re pale, girl,” is all he says, though, and “put that bloody bag down, eh,” and I obey him silently and look around the room for a place to sit. The room is narrow and cosy, really: wooden shutters that he noisily opens so you can hear the street, peach and ochre coloured walls, and rough carpets on the floor with big mirrored cushions. I settle myself down on one of these, feeling like my weight will make it break.

“So, Mary-Lyn, what is it you’re doing here?” he asks, saying my name in two syllables.

“I was just about to ask you the same thing,” I say.

Behind a large partition there is another ‘room,’ space to spread myself out away
from his gaze. He shows me the shower facilities – bucket and cold water tap level with the toilet – “I use the kettle in winter,” he says, and I lock myself in with the cool stone floor and let the water slough the loose pieces of me away. There isn’t a mirror anywhere in sight, unless you count the little triangular ones that glitter over everything – but it’s a distorted view.

I’m only just out of the shower when my uncle knocks warily on the wood of the partition, tossing me a key. “Here, honey, I’ll be back lunch time,” he says slowly from under his beard. Just as he’s about to leave, though, his eye catches the portfolio of my paintings on the low wooden table. “This you?” he asks me, something between condescension and pity catching in his voice.

I try to look at the pictures as if I’m not me: long pale faces with big frightened eyes, thick oily brushstrokes that leap off the page. Sometimes at exhibitions I’d hear people whispering, ‘field day for a psychotherapist’, stuff like that; they never recognise me at first. I paint myself much bleaker than I am. Really I’m not unattractive, thin black hair to my waist, dark eyes, long legs. A certain pallor. “Good stuff,” I hear him say as he leaves: it sounds like an afterthought.

I lie down flat on the narrow mattress, the sheets aren’t fresh but they are unstained. The morning light sifts through the shutters, splatters of English mixed with some Nepalese dialect, the smell of eggs for tourists and rice with daal.

I dream that I’m screwing George, my therapist.

I had been so careful when I’d chosen George. Somebody ugly, I thought to myself; someone who’s old. A female wasn’t an option, though I can’t say why, exactly. I wanted a man.

When I first met George, he fit the bill, except for the old part, but he was ugly enough. Shorter than me and starting to bald. Big paunch, hairy hands, enough of all the things that put me off any man. Except that I’d left out one small detail.

I often wondered if was really ethical practice, the way George did things, but it seemed to be doing me good, so I didn’t complain. I’d been popping Prozac when I went to him and getting thin and losing my sex drive, hadn’t painted a brushstroke in years. The Prozac hadn’t helped, just flattened things out.

I didn’t tell my current lover, Richard, too much about George, but he didn’t care. Long as he got his Mary-Lyn to open her legs again: he’d been such a good sport about it considering the way he’d been duped.
I loll back into the lumpy mattress and close my eyes, wiping the image out of my head, watching the colours change. An air hostess is asking for my passport again, but it isn’t anywhere, they’re not going to let the plane land. I’m rummaging in my money belt, old ticket stubs from the Underground and business cards that I never use, except for filters. “Marilyn, artist,” they say, swelling to fill my hands, their edges sharp, they hurt and I fling them onto the ground. There is blood on my palms where they cut me. “I can’t find it,” I say to the air hostess, desperate now, then my hand touches something rectangular and ribbed. “Here!” I say out loud, I’m saved. But when I pull it out I see that it’s my old passport; chopped off in the corner, out of date. The engines start to hum.

I can hear a motorbike pull up outside, and I need to pee, but before I’ve managed to get out of the bathroom he’s at the door. “Mary!” he bellows out, his voice is fruity with alcohol, there’s a woman’s voice, too. “Hi,” I squint at them, emerging from my space behind the partition, there’s so much light in the room now that I can barely see.

“This is Mai,” he says and then, “Darling, there must be some stuff in Katmandu for you to see. Don’t fancy you’d like to watch me,” and the woman giggles, she couldn’t be more than sixteen and I hold back a glare. “How old is she?” I ask him, but I can see that my comments are uncalled for here, so I pack a small rucksack and go past them to face the street. “Couple of hours will do!” he calls out to me as I leave.

It’s still morning, late, I grab a coffee and some fresh croissants at a small cafe, they’re all the same: narrow tourist streets below, everything coloured and for sale. On top of the wooden houses there are women hanging out washing and a couple of restaurants and guest houses with perfect lettered signs.

In the street a male voice asks me if I want to change money, another if I want to buy hash, but I don’t catch who they are, I don’t look at them; eye contact in places like this can be dangerous.

“It doesn’t matter what turns you on,” says George. “As long as it does.” For months, now, he’s been telling me his fantasies, he isn’t a Freudian silent behind-the-couch type. This time he’s pulled out the private collection of magazines. “It’s shocking, I
know," he says mildly; I watch his eyes light up. “Have you ever wanted someone to tie you up? ” he asks, but I don’t say a thing; it’s become part of the ritual.

Richard doesn’t say anything, either, when I call him that day at work and make him come home. “Been to George today?” he says, simply. If he feels anything about it then it doesn’t show.

“Have you ever had fantasies about bondage?” I ask him, but he just smiles at me understandingly like I’m some wayward child. “No,” he says, “but I could get into anything.” It’s going to be hard to tell him about George, another part of me that Richard won’t have.

The streets are turning narrow; the colours are gone. I’m out of the tourist district without noticing, rabid looking dogs chase me and everyone stares. I step up my pace, there’s a stench of urine in the gutters, a scraggy dog with bald patches and fleas brushes by, I run and trip into a stream of sewage.

“Would you like some more?” asks George; the lights are low, they seem to get dimmer every time. We sit up on big leather chairs in his room with the open fire, it’s adult, cosy, he offers me tea in a glass. He doesn’t touch.

“Tell me about Richard,” he says, there’s a timbre in his voice that lulls me, hypnotising, I tell him things I would never say to anyone. “I don’t think it could work with him,” I hear myself say, “it would just feel silly.”

“And what about me?” he says, finally he’s said it; the words feel like electricity under my skin.

“Would you like to?” he asks, and before I know it he is on his knees at my feet. He pulls one leg to the edge of the chair and ties it on, then the other leg. “Alright?” he asks me in that low smooth voice. I nod. He walks around behind me and pulls back my hands, binding them tight. “How does that feel?”

I’m breathing heavily, now; I’m not certain what he will do, though I’m not afraid. “I won’t touch you,” he assures me, lifting my dress. “I see that you’re wearing those panties,” he says.

When I get home this time, I don’t call Richard, don’t know what I’d say. Perhaps this is how it ends up for all of George’s patients. “There is something cathartic in the complete surrender of control,” he says. “Or use of it.” But now my fantasies cut with the edge of revenge, it excites me more than anything: George
strapped to his chair, I’d just leave him there, stand by while his secretary has to untie him, taking photos for the latest issue of Psychotherapy Today.

I am standing opposite a huge stone Buddha, or perhaps it’s a fertility goddess, it does seem to have a lot of breasts and I’m too far away to tell. I’m really not sure how I got here – somewhere I crossed a small bridge and then went up some stairs, pushing past boys selling postcards and cardboard huts with plastic necklaces of the Buddha. But then I think I hear my name: “Mary, Lyn,” calls the high sweet voice, it sounds like singing. I hear it rush up behind me, unceasing and tuneful, “Mary, Lyn,” and turn to see a local girl in a leather jacket, holding a helmet under her arm.

“Uncle told me to come and take you,” it’s Mai, I realise – well, it must be – all Nepalese girls look the same to me.

“But how did you know I was here?” Even I didn’t know.

“All tourist here,” she says. “Come now to village. You like motorbike?”

Mai leads me down the steps, cursing the boys by name as she pushes past. “I tell him he son of bitch praying mantis on tourist,” she says proudly. “I learn English in school.”

At the foot of the stairs to the Buddha, Mai unlocks a chain from a huge Harley Davidson. “From Uncle,” she says, “We bring him back morning. OK?” I nod. I can’t really think what else to do. “What about a helmet?” I ask, and she hands me hers.

“Thick skull,” she says, tapping her head.

We swerve through the traffic out of Katmandu and I think I’m going to die. Then the mountains spring up all around us, and I forget that my life is in the hands of a suicidal sixteen year old, all I feel is the wind blowing fast through my clothes and a surge through my veins.

“Fuck this bastard bike,” says Mai, she sings the words into the wind like she’s speaking a secret language. We’ve turned off the highway, now and we’re climbing the edges of rice paddies, built for small brown feet in leather shoes, or donkeys or Sherpas with packs. I can’t see how we’re going to do it on a motorbike.

“I have uncle, too,” she calls out to me, and stops the Harley in front of a small thatched hut at the foot of the mountainside, and motions me to dismount. “Leave bike here with uncle, aunty, fourteen cousins and twenty-six small black dogs for dinner,” she says, laughing. But then they all seem to stream out from the hut, it really isn’t small – thick orange walls from mud-clay, double-storied inside, and there they
all are, suddenly, gleaming from the doorway: uncle, aunty, fourteen cousins and too many little black dogs to count.

"Stay for dinner?" asks Mai, after a short, emotional consultation with her aunty, but then she thinks better of it. "Drink tea here, then we walk up mountain before dark. No street lights," and the aunty makes us sweetened tea on an open fire inside, takes out seven packets of maggi two-minute noodles and empties boiling water on them into a bowl. "We have dogs later, my house."

The guide books had been very specific about Nepalese customs regarding pollution, and I try to remember: don't point your feet at people or pat them on the head; never put a used utensil into their food; don't eat meat in their temple, the Nepalese are strict vegetarians. I try to smile between mouthfuls of food that takes me back to my student days, it was all that I ate, then, becoming so fragile I thought I might break. Perhaps that's what I was hoping for.

I feel like I'm flying: the way that the edges of rice paddies fall off beneath us, the dry heat and the thinness of air, snowy crags in the distance that look like they've sprung from nowhere. We're on our way up the slopes to the highest house in the highest village: hers. "You look better than in paintings," she calls back to me from the orange sliver of path that barely leaves room for our feet. "You ugly there. Why you paint yourself like that?" It's the first sentence I've heard from her without an obscenity.

I have questions that I'd like to ask her, too, like why is she spending her youth on a middle aged alcoholic who hasn't realised that the world has moved on. "Harley Davidson," she says, suddenly, turning around. "Uncle great fuck and has Harley Davidson," but I don't remember verbalising the question. "So why you paint yourself ugly?" she asks again.

I don't just paint myself ugly, I don't even think of it in terms like that. I think of it as weak, frightened, victimised, obsessed, I could go on forever with the adjectives. It isn't that I always feel like that, I paint myself in the way that I'm never seen; it's like revealing a secret.

"We have paintings," says Mai, as if I've answered her, and when we get to the highest house in the highest village, she whispers to her father, a big ruddy man with greying hair, and they lead me up the stairs while the mother puts extra mud on the
floor for the guests and lights the stove until the earth and fragrant rice and incense all mingle into a single smell.

The room upstairs is cool and fresh, and the father leads me to a corner decorated with small shrines covered in garlands. "My god, strong," he says, showing me a painting of a lion pulling his chest open to reveal tiny meditating figures in his heart.

"My god," says Mai, taking me to the next shrine, a red, naked goddess with a bow and arrow in two of her four hands, shooting flowers and fire. "Kurukulla, Tara," she tells me, "fire princess." And then her father asks me "who is your god?" But I don't have any answer I can give.

She must be the most beautiful painting I have ever seen, a tacky reproduction, but she intrudes on my consciousness. "She squash stupid man with one toe," Mai points out to me, "make life out of death" she says, "make fire in bed."

I make a shrine to my paintings, too, my own distorted image; oil paints do that, shock you with the illusion of reality, it's the way the light bounces off their sheen. But I can't think why anyone buys them to put on their lounge room wall.

The closer I get to home, the more physical the sensation becomes: my skin pinched and stretching to be touched. If I could paint it, it would be aching, pulling away from my body like an airless balloon. But I don’t have my paints here.

George used to make me feel like that. Mostly when I imagined him leaving, "hold me," I would ask him, I wanted to feel the frailness of his body next to mine, the way that all bodies are vulnerable, open to pain, it's in our essence, and George would say "no, it's not part of the therapeutic arrangement." And I’d curl myself up into foetal position and cry.

But this was a fantasy I never revealed, and I never asked: it might come true.
I couldn’t even imagine Richard making me cry.

Mai lets me off the bike at my uncle's, hands me the key and blends herself into the passing crowd. I'm not wary anymore as I climb up the smooth stone stairs, and when I go in I see that he's got out the family photos - didn't pick him for the type. "Hey, look at this one," he says, like he’s been expecting me.

"Why did you leave?" I ask him, and suddenly he looks uncomfortable and small, I haven’t seen him like this, and he changes the subject, rising back to full size.
"They have no concept of self-disgust, you know, these people," he says. "But they could never paint like you."

Back on the lumpy mattress, I dream that I’m lost in the hills of Nepal, I’m searching for something you can’t find here, Richard, a citrus grove. I scale the mountain trails and I come to a house: it’s made of glass, the doors so clear you’d mistake them for open space. A man comes out, and he hands me a glass of his water for the way; as I leave the house it fades into mountain tops like a mirage, and I take up another direction. I’m looking for my own grove of trees.

In the morning I pack for the journey. As the plane takes off, I watch the way that the Katmandu Valley spirals underneath me and then disappears. This time, I don’t reach out for anyone’s arm.
I used to love it when school would end and the sea breeze swept over us all. It meant we were going, soon, in our old green Valiant with the music up loud, leaving the melting asphalt, bags packed to overflowing from the roof rack my father had seemed to effortlessly tack on. “You can walk on the water, you can drown in the sand,” they’d call out in unison to the music, and I could already feel the layers of city peel away.

Father never stayed that long – and he doesn’t now, heading back to the city house after only a day. But we were never alone those summers, assortments of friends and relatives coming to stay, arriving unannounced at the old screen door with bags and packages, small plastic bags filled with sticky, pungent green.

The beach house was not always like it is now, towering and neat above the waves; once, it was wild, and fresh anemones would brush up against its red-brick edge, and neighbours’ sandy grass overlapped boundaries. Now everyone here is rich, some of them famous. This is where they come to get away.

This is where I used to come, set up my canvas in the sprawling yard, it felt as if the miles of beach and sea were part of its endlessness. In the lengthening summer of days I would make my rituals, forming a life out of hidden rock pools and flows of tide, storekeepers who sold one cent chocolates in bright paper bags. Meals that were always ready as we banged the flyscreen door with sandy hands, and the smell of sea enveloping us in its salty layer.

If I remember correctly, and I’m sure that I don’t, it seemed to be the only time that I felt free, as if the core of everything had come from this one small place where my body crispened into brown and I felt the sense of it instead of its burden. As if the heat of summers and the foam that crashed off waves had got inside of my bones and nestled there, secretly, waiting all of these years.

Mother drifts out of the house with the big glass windows, they transform the water into a silent movie. She’s wearing white, “it reflects the bad vibrations,” she says in her new, soft voice that is consciously mellow, she’s brought it down an octave and at least five decibels since I was a kid. “Let’s go to the promenade,
Marilyn,” she suggests, saying my name how it’s supposed to be, and the wooden beads jangle around her neck while she lifts soft white feet into matching sandals and pulls on a big straw hat.

“How come you’ve never painted any of us?” she asks. The promenade is wide and follows the line of seashore, above the houses whose owners have paid so much money to be on the sea, fencing off pieces of foreshore like they belong to them. The shops are a mix, up-market New Age and old grocery stores transformed into gourmet delis; everyone is trying to get relaxed down here but you can smell the effort of it in the air.

We drift into a cafe, it seems the right one: slightly grunge, old seventies songs, colourful art on the walls. “They have the best coffee here,” Mother says in her new, low voice, and we order coffee and focaccios that take seconds to arrive.

“So, you didn’t answer my question,” she presses me; we’d torn off all that brown paper the day before, in the city house, they’d attempted to hide their shock or disappointment, their beautiful only girl on the canvas like that. For days I’d left them covered in the hallway, like mirrors after someone has died: frightened of letting all that dark energy into their fragile, precious peace. “You’re so talented, darling,” my father said, thickly. “They’re amazing,” Mother had said, finally, wondering where she must have gone wrong.

I don’t answer her question, now, I never do. She asks me like a demanding child, there was always something girlish about her, some way she had never grown up.

“She was so beautiful,” my uncle had said, past tense tinged with a sadness I couldn’t begin to understand. It was the day before I left Nepal and he’d taken out a photo of mother, it looked like it was from the sixties – long tousled hair and flowery Indian dress and outlandish jewellery – but she’d sent it the year before. “All she had to do was sit tight and wait for the fashions to change again,” he mused, “she sent me crystals, too. She says she communicates with higher beings,” and you could see it in her face in the photograph, the way she struggled to keep an even-tempered smile.

Somewhere under all this white she was there, still: mother, small and light, wide graceful movements and nervous, delicate hands. But I didn’t want to know.
It’s latish morning, the cafe starts to overflow, beautiful clothing and coffee smells waft by. Everyone gives the appearance of striving for something that will take the edge off their suffering, you can feel the pounding of it to the beat of songs that are old and middle aged.

I watch my mother catch the eye of a young man, I notice his almost-beard and the way his shoulders pull the thin cotton of shirt across his chest. “This is Marilyn,” she smiles, “You must come to her exhibition,” and he smiles back knowingly, and moves on. “Who is he, mother?” I ask her, I try not to ask her questions, letting her remade life glance by me, untouchable, but she’s being enigmatic this time. Or maybe she’s just being proud.

Sometimes my parents’ life seemed like an endless tape of the Rolling Stones that was always playing, they seemed to have the words for every occasion, primal energy bursting out of tight jeans into song; they sang along. Mother in her Ruby Tuesday dresses, dreams contracted until they filled the form of one man.

Andrew wasn’t really my uncle, but he was related somehow: it was my father who had introduced the incestuous epithet, perhaps he was trying to make a statement, Uncle Andrew had become so much a part of their lives.

“Tell me about him,” Mother says, she tries not to sound like she’s pleading; but what will I say? That he’s fucking a sixteen year old Nepalese girl who doesn’t love him? That he’s become fat, an alcoholic, took his Harley with him to Katmandu, cries over her photographs: what should I say?

“He was good to me,” I tell her. “He’s getting what he needs. He doesn’t seem happy,” I say.

Mother takes a slow bite out of her focaccio, I can’t understand how people eat these things, I pull the filling out of mine and leave the cardboard bread behind. I’ve chosen my words carefully, she knows that they’re full with what I haven’t said, that I’ll tell her if she asks. “Did Drew mention me?” she asks, finally, using the name she called him, washing down her words with unsweetened gulps, the coffee must be burning her the way she’s drinking it.

“When I left he showed me your photograph. He said you were beautiful. That you hadn’t changed.”
My mother had been beautiful, that was why Father had married her, everyone said. He was tall and dark and handsome like men in movies, slightly unshaven, sometimes he looked a little dangerous. Perhaps that’s what she liked about him.

I eat without feeling it, as if my mind is not connected to my body, I wonder how it got to be this way. Perhaps that is why only the most extreme of feelings manages to penetrate, as if I have numbed myself to ordinary pleasures and pain.

Mother stuffs me full of exotic fruits and homemade (not by her) pastry, but I haven’t settled in here well enough to feel the urge to eat. Hunger is a nuisance, some days I manage to ignore its insistence, watching it withdraw, hurriedly placated by scraps like a demanding child.

It takes a day or two before I actually start to perceive the things around me: song birds that whistle repetitive tunes and wind blowing leaves. The clouds move in huge, fluffy shadings of grey and speckle the sand. The sound of wood expanding when the sun rises full, and suddenly food acquires taste and smell, I eat it slowly and feel the texture of every mouthful.

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It’s a small, trendy gallery in a renovated Edwardian, you have to climb lots of stairs and guests gather on the landings. Everywhere I look, there is me: staring green-eyed out of large canvasses with small, red ‘sold’ dots scattered across oily surfaces.

That’s where I meet Anton, though I’m sure I have met him before. Underneath the largest canvas of me, there is more body in this one, less fear in the eyes. A beach memory, perhaps, but no one has bought it, yet. They prefer my terror, paint thick-lined like welts and bodies trapped in narrow rooms.

“I like you better like that,” he says to me, it’s a deep voice with something unsure in it; like his beard, as though it’s not certain about being there. The man from the cafe. “Did you paint that one before the others?” he asks, and I nod to him. I like his smile, the way it lingers on me; how it seems that he wouldn’t offer it up without a cause.

The room is crowded. I’m hot even in sleeveless velour, he takes a glass of cheap champagne off a passing tray and puts it in my hand.

“Are you going to buy it?” I ask him.
"I'm going to wait for your next exhibition," he says, still holding my eyes in his, as if he knows already how I will paint myself.

Eyes have everything in them. That's why they bulge out of my canvasses like they're looking at you. Seeing some hidden part of you you're too scared to reveal.

The first time together, Anton won't sleep with me. "I just want to touch you," he says, and I let him, I would let this man do anything he asked of me, I don't even know why. Like the pain of longing for him is already etched into me, waiting for his touch to awaken it.

There are only stars. He pulls my shirt apart and holds me like he has never felt a woman before, as if he's frightened of something, savouring every moment like it would be cheapened if he satisfied his desire. Or mine.

"Why?" I ask him helplessly, watching his head bent over me, like a child.

"It's what I first thought of when I saw you," he says.

It's a big decision: to stretch out a new canvas, here, in this place again. Pull the cream-coloured canvas over wooden beams, tight, with the sunlight through it.

The smell of oils floods me again like when I was a child, and I feel them splash on like waves.

Instead of painting what I am, I paint what I need, big furls of blue-green ocean and sand pure white like wind. Hands that are warm and brown on my skin, when they touch it, the red of wounds heals.

The painting grows with the days. After a week, I have to add new canvasses, it explodes inside me, softly, pushing to throw itself into light.

I can feel the image of something new growing inside me, she is full-hipped and larger than I am. Her breasts overflow her sides, the woman who lies, eyes closed on the beach as if she is me; the boundaries of the frame are not enough to keep her in. I think that if I can capture her, somehow, then she will not disappear, and I will somehow grow myself into her form.

At night, the sea washes over her in my dreams: mornings, I paint it, hallucinations fading into sky, like gods.
Funny how bits of imagined past get etched in your memory. As if they had actually happened the way you re-tell them. Transforming themselves into metaphors for everything that happens after that.

It’s late summer, and we’re all at the summer house. I’m ten, almost eleven. I always want to be ten, I declare, probably to myself, I doubt that anyone is especially listening. Wishing I could stay in that open space just before the late summer of ten changes everything.

At ten my father hugs me for the very last time, I know somehow as it’s happening, the thin strong arms around me on the couch where we sit. The paint on the window frame is peeled with the salt, it eats into everything like termites; later they put aluminium there.

I have climbed into his lap, I feel too old to be doing it, so I pretend to be some movie star from TV, the way I shower him with kisses and stroke his hair.

“That’s lovely,” he says to me. And I know at that moment that I will never, ever touch my father again.

Later, I would forget that episode, lying in my narrow bed with the wind blowing through to cool the sheets. Later, I would tell myself it was her who stopped touching me, not him, filling my ache up with tears. In the shower, I would cry for the knowing of things that must end. I was going to die. I knew too many things that I shouldn’t have known. Better just never to grow old.

After that, something thinned in me, like turpentine added to paint. I felt less real, everything did, parts lopped off or toned down so that you couldn’t hear the screams. A longing so blind that a small body could barely contain it all and survive.

I bought my first pair of hotpants later that year, chequered suede, saved from birthday money; paraded up and down the beach front, imagining boys who would look at my scrawny body and want me, whatever that meant. It was what all the grown ups were saying all of the time in that sweet-smelling tumbleweed garden that spread onto beach.

* 

We cross paths blindly, walk the same roads, footprints over each other in cool, wet sand, I can feel it on my soles where he’s been.
Every day I stop myself from calling Anton, or contriving to be in places where we might meet. I could call and he wouldn’t answer, ring the doorbell to find that he’s slipped out the back leaving the flyscreen to bang in the end of spring breeze.

This way, waiting, his indifference is only imagined.

This way, a week passes, two, three, until I am sure I will never see him again. That when I do, all the tension of having waited will silence me and we’ll pass each other, each of us on our own path, blindly. Treading the same asphalt sticky and black under our feet.

Not meeting is a test of my powers of control, how far I can stretch myself without giving in.

On good days, I am capable of developing theories that hold up to the light, but sometimes their thinness is almost transparent, like tracing paper against a window. He must see.

Him seeing is what frightens me, that he’ll know how I’ve been waiting.

In the times between seeing him, my paintings change, they rage. Blues and blacks stretch over them, bodies starved and straining, skin that gleams with effervescent night. Spilling out, I paint like a mad woman, possessed, drained, inspired by the passion to possess a thing I can’t.

When I meet Anton, I never know who he might be, which part of him I will get, this time; perhaps that’s why timing seems to be everything, why it’s assumed such cosmic proportions.

Perhaps that’s why it preoccupies me so much, and I keep on throwing these stupid coins.

It was because of Mother that I started with them, I hadn’t told her why, specifically, just explained the idea of timing, and her eyes lit up. “Wait here,” she whispered in that ethereal voice she gets sometimes, and then brought out this fat black book with Chinese characters on the side.

“Come on, Mother,” I say to her with the ‘you can’t be serious’ tone of a child, I must’ve said it to her like that a thousand times, we laugh at the intrusion of history and I put on my sceptical Doing it for Mother face and toss the coins.

I like the feel of them in my hands, they’re actually ancient Chinese coins, rough brass with lettering that’s worn with the years, hand-scraped and square holes in the centre where they can be strung like beads. I throw them six times and Mother draws
single lines and broken ones on a thick white page, then we look up the pattern in the index she's stapled into the cover. Next to the introduction by Jung about synchronicity which is meant to somehow impress the Western mind.

The last time I saw Anton, he stroked my hair.

I don’t remember anything that he said or how it was that I got to be there, it was a party on the beach, I’d gone there and got lost in the crowd. And suddenly he was standing there, saying something soft, I could feel his skin through the threadbare T-shirt and he lifted his hand to stroke my hair; it must have reminded me of something, someone lost before memory. It felt like love.

“You know why I like you,” he started to say, but then the music reached some mistimed crescendo, so I never heard why, and people started dancing around us and then everything got pulled away.

He takes me back to my past in ways that I don’t expect, my emotions are like flashbacks. On the canvas, they are colours and forms that seem recognisable, parts of me that were buried, chaotic, as if the reliving brings them to light in a different way, casting new shadows.

Sometimes, when the images get really strong, I am glad of not seeing him: it might stop it emerging in paint. And I would understand everything differently; a little less.

Mother thinks that the world gives its makers what they ask for, at least that’s what she says. The cliched way that she spills out the words, the fact that it’s my mother saying them, doesn’t alter the way that they resonate. I pretend that it isn’t her, that the small faded lips around them come from some other place, so that I don’t immediately tell her. That’s what I always do, give her no credit for wisdom of any kind.

Something about her, though, has actually changed, not just the voice and the skin and the coverings. Her spareness with words, perhaps that’s it; the way that she doesn’t intrude on me with them anymore, so I am able to really listen.

She reads to me from The Book of Changes, I feel like a child with a bedtime story. The Arousing is the first hexagram that I’ve thrown: “Shock brings danger a hundred thousand times,” says the ink on paper in the fat black book, “You lose your
treasures and must climb the nine hills. Do not go in pursuit of them. After seven days you will get them back again.”

After that, there is Deliverance: “Danger produces movement,” croons my mother’s voice. “Through movement, one escapes danger: this is deliverance. When heaven and earth deliver themselves, thunder and rain set in. When thunder and rain set in, the seed pods of all fruits, plants, and trees break open.”

Reading this book is a little like a horoscope: do prophecies become self-fulfilling? Only, perhaps, if they resonate what you want to be true.

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Late morning. I spread myself out on a soft, thin mattress over the floorboards, facing the sea, there are only gull squalls and the crash of waves. The salt leaves a fine, oily layer on my skin. I feel that it is protecting me.

A low voice weaves itself into my half-sleep, it starts at a distance, above me, hesitating. Swooping down, finally, till its warm breath changes the chemistry of the air.

“I’m sorry I’ve been away so long,” it says, and hot tears spill out of my body, full, sparing droplets like first rains.

But when I open my eyes, finally, in half-belief, it is really Anton there, and I forget everything I had to say to him, letting his body find its place pressed close to mine.

When Mother comes back that evening, I tell her about Nepal, everything: the teenage lover, the alcohol, the bike. The way that Drew spoke when he looked at her photograph. “He’s getting old, Mum,” I say to her, I realise I’m not calling her Mother, now. “Go to him,” I say, closing the space between us, I can feel the physicality of how it contracts though we barely move.

“You only live once, Mum,” I tell her.

“No you don’t,” she says.
Most things about her Anton can’t recall. He doesn’t know what she was like, just little details, the way she held her hands when she prayed, or her allergies that meant he couldn’t keep pets. The way she’d sit on the couch with her legs curled up underneath her, “just like you are now, Marilyn,” he says carelessly, and the boyfriends he would try to scare away.

Some scenes, though, stay with him, re-running slow before his eyes like an endless tape.

He sees her dead. He sees himself, he’s running down the stairs with the thick wood banister and the carpet held down flat by long brass rods that stretch across each step so no one falls.

He remembers her funeral, old ladies in the kitchen. They’re talking about people he’s not heard of. “And then she left him, not even a frozen meal in the fridgidaire,” one of them says, it’s hard to know how she gets anything out of her mouth through all those crackers and cheese, and bits of them go flying onto his floor.

“Oh yes, dear, so sad how she did that,” says the blue-rinse next to her, and then suddenly, he realises: the old ladies at his mother’s funeral are discussing a TV show.

He leaves the room. In the lounge, relatives with too-large pores and evil breath come and pat him on the head. “Poor orphan boy,” he thinks he hears them say, making dog-eyes into his; in the end it’s the uncles who save him, not the sisters or aunties or neighbour’s wives. “‘Ere, son,” they say, and slap him on the back like he’s a man, now, slipping him glasses of juice laced with brandy.

The times I spend with Anton feel like they are stolen from their normal place in the world, pieces you can never put back in. Sometimes life feels as if it’s made of these. You eat and work and sleep but none of this is real, it doesn’t stay etched in you, snatched away like autumn takes out leaves. The parts that lodge themselves in your body are so minuscule, like iron filings, filling in the cracks where life shines through.

He’s been working at the stables now each summer since his mother died; that’s four, now, and this woman has taken him in and taught him things and been good to him.
Like a mother, almost. Until after a while he stops being frightened that she'll go like everyone else.

It's a day, like all the others. He's watching her from behind while they trot, he always rides behind. She's thirty, blond. Fifteen years there are between them. "I was just a kid," he says to me.

On the grass, they both dismount. Sit down, she tells him and he does, he's used to her saying what to do.

He's beautiful, this boy. There's something old and young about him all at once, he knows what other children can't imagine, but it's stunted him, too. The earth had stopped moving and somehow he was meant to eat and breathe and go to school, so he froze parts of himself to make them numb to cold.

The woman is kind to him, and strong. She pries him open, parts he hasn't known were there. Some days he can even feel the sun and the horse mute beneath him, they move with a kind of oneness. As if the beast can understand.

The fields are coloured. He's never looked at her like this before, and the thought confuses him and he's sure that she can see his shame. "Come here," she says, there's something authoritative in the voice she has, it's the way she talks to horses, too, no whips or spurs or coaxing. Just that sharpness in her tone and they comply.

They tie their horses to a tree and then sit down.

"You were watching me before, weren't you?" she says to him, but the sting has gone out of her voice and she's lying back now, on her side and the curve of her lifts up out of the longish grass.

"You want to be with me, don't you?" she says, but the thought of it shocks him so much that he cannot speak.

She moves her body closer, and he's paralysed, but manages to move away. She takes it for shyness, that's how she makes it seem, and forces herself on him, pulling down his shorts and underpants, lifting her dress up high. No.

His eyes are closed, now. No, he says. He thinks he's said it, sure he has. "It's alright," she whispers, taking him in her hands.

He doesn't know what happens after that, his body disobedys him. He's silent and doesn't cry. Even at his mother's funeral, he didn't, so why should he now?

Afterwards she doesn't say a word. Removes herself from his body and retrieves her underwear. "Come on," she says again. She's laughing. God. She doesn't even know.
Anton doesn’t tell the story like this at all. He says: she raped me. I trusted her.

"It isn’t just because of sex?" he asks me, then. "That’s not the only reason that you talk to me?"

"No," I say, simply, there is too much that I want to say, but all I want right now is to hold him, as if touching him could heal some wound.

"Come here," I say to him then, and he stands and holds his hand out for mine to pull me close, and I bury my head in the space next to his shoulder.

For weeks afterwards, I will feel the places where his body touched mine and I won’t look at him. I won’t be able to without wanting him again and knowing that he won’t be there.

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There are things that I have been taught to forget, and things that he has, so that our coming together is like an impossible puzzle.

He still won’t make love to me: scared of what he’ll say or what he’ll do. I am scared he never will, as if there is something in me that only his body will release.

Anton says that people are like animals; I wish I knew how that felt, although of course I do. It’s just that the animals I picture are not what I’d like to be: birds, mostly, I can’t think why that is the image of me, perhaps it is the thinness of their legs and the sharp way that their eyes move and beaks that bore through trees to always find the things they need.

Anton’s chosen dogs. Maybe it’s their cyclical nature that draws him, males who mark out territory with their urine, sliding into lonely days of sleeping, eating, scratching fleas. Roused just by the smell of a bitch on heat, it’s programmed into them, they can’t resist. "We’re just like animals," he says to me again, this time an edge of bitterness sears his voice, making it gravelly, almost uncontrolled until he’s no longer seeing.

I dream I am in an apartment made from polystyrene, when you touch the walls they crumble in your hands. That’s how foundations are made, you line the dug-out earth with polystyrene and it keeps the feel of soil on your fingertips at bay.
I go into the apartment, it is Anton’s, there are lots of people buying things at a cash register next to the bed. Outside the window, there is desert. I don’t feel well and someone tells me to lie down.

I am in his bed, dressed, under his covers. He comes in and lies with me, I feel like John and Yoko in the middle of this room except we’re clothed. “Here,” he says, passing me a children’s book with a picture of a train. “Movers,” it is called, but I can’t understand how anything in it works and I replay the scene again, because finally I am in his bed, but he keeps his clothes on and keeps insisting: Here, he says, taking the book from the shelf again, until I wake with the feel of thick shiny cardboard rounded in my hands.

I tell Anton about George. There’s something about this story that makes me tell it differently each time. Maybe it’s the mixture of excitement and humiliation, each causing the other. Sometimes looking back I’m not sure what to choose.

George would have liked my dreams. Some days, he’d compliment me on the metaphors, praising my unconscious like a child. It felt like my mother telling me I was beautiful, something I’d done nothing to achieve.

Then he decided to introduce some of his own. “Like this you can’t resist your body,” he’d say, it’s the first time that he touches me. I’ve been thirsting so long for it that I ache. He’s gone a step further now, watching while I peel off my summer dress in front of a mirror, moving me back against a wall while he gently immobilises my hands. “Look how beautiful you are,” he says.

“Do you treat all your patients like this?” I manage to ask, and he waits before he answers, kneeling before me, letting his fingers slowly move, so by now I don’t care what his answer will be.

“If they let me,” he says, looking up momentarily to smile.

Something about the way he is kneeling before me makes me feel like I’m being worshipped, an object of religion or of art, and in my mind I’m already painting myself like that: taller than I am and in control. Watching the way that this man is clearly taking pleasure in his work.

That day, George gives me The Story of O to take home and read, it must be part of my cure. Something in me has come to trust him again, or maybe I just need to keep going back to see what the next episode will be. Half way through the book, though, I can no longer stand it: the meticulous way that the author describes this
woman’s debasement, the stages he sets in your mind that you’ll never be free of. Once I get the idea, I skip to the end where I know already she will die because the preface says so.

George says there is something in all of us that makes O’s story resonate, so that some aspects of her torture stay with you as erotic images. The way she is always naked under her clothes, constantly available; the bizarre process of moulding her into an object; the allure of her submission...only a man could have conceived of it all.

The next time I see George it is formal, again. We sit face to face in the darkened room and we analyse. Now is when you have to go, he tells me. Get away.

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Anton asks me if I have ever been raped. No, I say. It’s the night that he tells me about being fifteen, “that was all she wanted me for, that’s all that she saw.”

“I didn’t think of her sexually at all, then,” he says, and suddenly a smile comes over him, and a glint in the emptiness that was his eyes. “Now it’s the other way round,” he says, as if this is her punishment. And not just hers.

The past is a fascinating thing, the way it always changes. People ask me why I paint myself so much, and that’s what I say.

The problem, though, is that if you’ve shared it with someone, you have to agree about what happened. Perhaps that’s why people need to confront the ones who’ve made them suffer. Two versions of the past will always keep tearing you apart, especially if they both seem true.

That’s what I want to tell Anton. “Is she still around, have you ever told her?” I ask him one day.

No, I’ve never said anything, he says.

But you see her sometimes?

Yes.

How does that make you feel?

It was twenty years ago.

Then why did you need to tell me?
We are standing in the middle of an empty, run-down building I am thinking to rent for a studio. It towers high above the beach, perched on a rocky outcrop like it’s about to fall. No road can reach here, there’s just track. “It’s been deserted for years,” mother told me, “used to be Grace’s Café, she moved out here when we did. You might remember it.”

I don’t usually take mother’s advice, but something in her description catches my breath. “I worked for Grace back then. We didn’t have a lot of customers, not in the day, not in winter, especially. Something about those windows made me want to paint what I saw, but all that came out was bad poetry about dying love. That place was made for an artist. Go on, have a look.”

I can imagine mother up in that place, or maybe I actually remember it, I do remember Grace: she was very tall, and her hair was long and she always smelt of something strange and special.

The day I am going to see Grace’s old café I pass Anton on the promenade. “I’m going to check out a studio,” I tell him, “do you want to come?” and he changes tack and starts walking with me, you could drive most of the way but it’s spring just starting to bloom and I want to be in it.

The agent has given me a key to double wooden doors with “Grace’s” still above them in sea-washed paint. The floor boards are dusty, and the white paint on the window-sills is peeling off. Basically, it’s just one room, a counter on the right hand side divides it unevenly, swinging round to end before the wall that takes your breath away: just wood and glass and beach and ocean view. How could nobody want this?

I’d asked the agent the story of Grace’s café, but he was vague. Yes, there was a Grace here once, but fifteen years ago she disappeared. Local farming family built the place, but except for a brief flowering it’s been barely used. “Café’s opened up on the beach with road access, you know.”

I go to sit inside one of the window frames, they’re built like boxes so you can hole up there all day, just need a couple of throw cushions and you’re made. Now I start to recall how it was when Grace was here, I have a memory of sitting here in just this place.

“Hey, Anton,” I say finally, letting him into my picture frame. “What do you think?”

Anton is lost in his world, too, like he’s calculating something in his head.
"Does it bring back memories?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Are they things that you want to remember?"

It's spring. I'm five years old. Father has gone to the city house - that's what we call it before we call it home, and this is the summer palace. Now, we're still living here, but father's gone away.

There are lots of men. Mother says it's dad's fault if he went away. Uncle Drew comes past the house sometimes, I always know when it's him because of that coughing noise that his bike makes.

"Hey Marilyn," he calls out to me, "you need a shorter name. How about Mary?" and for him that's what I become. Mary-Lyn.

When Drew comes, mother gets sad. They talk in low voices for hours and then he leaves. After that, she goes out to the garden and smokes a lot and then she comes back in all happy again. Lets go out and play, she says to me then.

Going out to play means she's going to look for men. I'm little, but I know. We walk along the beach to the playground, she sees my teacher there and they talk and he comes home with us.

Sometimes, she doesn't even have to go out at all, but she doesn't like it when men show up at the door. Not unless it's Drew, or that man who throws newspapers. "Marilyn, honey, go to the door and ask them to go, please," she says, and after that they know they can't just come here uninvited, as if it's a brothel, she says in the voice that means she's going to smoke more of that green stuff.

"But maybe they like you too much, mummy," I say to her, it worries me how sad their faces get when I send them away.

On the weekends, father comes. Then the other people stay away and it's just us three, but it isn't that much fun.

"Marilyn, what were you remembering?"

Anton. God, I'd almost forgotten he was here.

"Just my mother being promiscuous," I say.

Anton comes to sit opposite me in the window box, there's room for two of us comfortably. I like the careless way his body touches mine.
"So," he says, "does it make you want to paint?" The sun is just past high in the sky and the waves are lit up with specks of it, like they have fallen in.

"Too peaceful."

"Too beautiful, you mean."

"That too." I smile. I like it when he's being perceptive.

"You don't have to paint this, though," he continues. "It's just a backdrop."

"My mother told me once that she wanted to paint from here. She used to sit and look out the window and wish that she could."

"So that makes you not want to come here."

"Yeah."

"Is that a good enough reason? How does being here make you feel?"

"Well, right now it's hard not to feel your leg touching mine."

Anton smiles, moving his legs to pull me closer.

"I can't stand this anymore," I say, hearing the breath quicken inside him while his hands touch my hair.

"Why won't you be with me, Anton?"

"I can't, Marilyn," he says, and he holds me tight so I can feel the hardness of him against me and I start to cry. "I care for you too much," he tells me, finally. "If we have sex then everything will change, it will spin out of control and then..."

"And then what?"

"And then it will end."

"But you sleep with other women, don't you? You're not a celibate? Or have you got some wife somewhere locked away?" I've broken his grip, now, taking myself outside of the circle of his arms.

"Not with anyone I want to see again."

"And that's how you're going to always live your life?" I'm screaming, now, standing up over him, later I will paint myself like this, sunlight spewed out, golden fragments clinging fast to window pane.

"But you don't know what will happen."

"You're not supposed to. Otherwise you'd just keep living the same things over and over again and waiting for the end." He nods, then, and gets up like he's going to leave.

"Come here," I say, holding out my arms to him again, and he brings his body to me and he starts to cry, I've never seen him do that, I've barely seen any man cry, I
can feel the wetness of his face on my shoulder and the prickles of newly-cut hair under my hands. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “It’s just that I love you.”

“That’s not enough.”

“What is?”

I’m starting to understand now why my mother took so many drugs, and all the rest of it, the other addictions too, that literally kept her full. When I ask Anton to leave I know already that I’ll make this place into mine, at least while I’m here, I can see the paintings I’ll fill it with, and the way that I’ll polish the floor and repaint the window frames. I stay until sunset, until the images have filled me up so high that I’m brimming, I don’t even need the sun.

I go back down the track but I’m tired now and it’s getting dark and I wish I had a car. Just then, I see mother driving by on the road, and throw out a hand so she’ll stop for me.

“So, are you taking it?” she asks.

I pause for a minute, like the moment of decision is too large for me to share.

“Yeah. I started imagining how it would look when I got up there, you know, what colour the curtains would be.”

She smiles. “That’s what happened to me the first time I came out here.”

“You’ve told me,” I snap back too fast, mother taking something of mine and making it all about her. Sometimes her life is so large that it crowds out me.

“So,” she repeats, ignoring my reaction. “Are you taking it?”

“Yes,” I say, the word emerging in a sigh. A kind of resignation. Any other way and I’d just be left fighting myself.

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People think I paint things over and over again, but I don’t: nothing is the same if you’ve done it once before.

This story, too. When I tell it, you will think you have heard it, and yes, it only happened once, just like there is only one of me. But each time I retell there is something new.
That’s what I say to Anton, when I ask him about what happened. “It’s just going over old pain,” he tells me. Opening wounds.

Every day I take out my paints and my brushes and put my wounds onto canvas. Every time, there’s a different voice, another angle, one I’d never see. Images nag me until they come out right, filling me so that ordinary things leave my field of vision, or if they remain then my focus of them is changed.
Author's Note