

It was Lunar New Year. Her parents sent her photos of her brother's baby at the reunion dinner; his feet wrinkled tender, his mouth open in a wet, pink 'o'. It was always the feet and the mouth she noticed first. How weightless, how little silence, they bore.

A few years ago, she asked her supervisor if she could fly down to visit her family for the New Year. Of course, her supervisor interrupted her, of course, you can go. And when she returned, her supervisor asked: what did you do? She could have said, we called our relatives, or we had a steamboat—describe her brother dropping raw bits of flesh into bubbling stock—but she said, we went wine-tasting in Martinborough. Something flashed in her supervisor's face, a look of being tricked, before she quickly recovered, replied, 'that sounds nice.'

Now, she had an awful feeling of dread when they turned onto Mount Alexander Road. The twenty palm trees lined up like soldiers, rushing her away from the city. The bleakness of the greying shops, the cars slotted in like dead fish. How the road flattened its body into the snaking tarmac of the freeway, weaving around the gumtrees, the wattle, the dry bush of orange; the palette of someone's cough.

Right now, her parents were probably choosing something to watch on Netflix, her father cradling the remote control in that way that irritated her; two curled fingers resting on the power button, like one rests their finger on the trigger, waiting for something to go wrong.

L rested his hands lightly on the steering wheel, not unlike her father's. But on him, cautiousness looked right. Cautiousness was a face angled in shadows. In certain lights though, she thought he looked bucolic. Could picture him languishing in 18th century pallor, averting his eyes to daylight.

'So many people on the road,' he commented, unmovingly.

The cars darted in and out of lanes ahead, as if to weave their way out of a traffic jam. If she squinted, she could see their backs glistening like a row of beetles.

'It *is* the holidays,' she replied.

'They must have the same idea as us,' he said, as if she hadn't spoken.

'Yes,' she said faintly, then with a vehemence that surprised him, 'I *hate* the freeway.'

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There were remnants of the maternal in the car, from the day they drove to the beach with his mother; the ziplock bag of sunscreen and insect repellent, which neither of them had thought to bring; a thick pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses, the type you bought at a pharmacy; and a small pack of Kleenex tissues.

He brought snacks, a fact that always touched her. There were digestive biscuits, which were already melting in the heat, and a bag of trail mix. At Preston Market, he had pointed out the thin rice crackers, dusted in sugar. He knew she ate them as a child; that they always made her think of Chinese school. No, she had shaken her head, smiling. They had only brought the dumpling wrappers, the pork mince and cabbage before they left, at his urging. She had half-heartedly wanted him to forget, Her own bag

carried her selfish essentials; thin flannelette pyjamas, the book she was reading, and half a tube of toothpaste.

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In an hour, she counted sixty-eight hay bales. The freeway had trickled down to a single road; a single car on the horizon, wavering heated lines. She smelt riding school, melted leather, cracked hay.

A winged dot sliced through the kilometres of silence; suspended, swooping.

‘Did you see that?’ she asked him.

‘What?’

‘A falcon, just near that powerline.’

L shrugged, unsurprised. ‘They’re common birds here.’

She felt foolish, then annoyed. She kept silent.

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Early on, one of her friends had asked her: is he funny? She remembered the pause, the strained ticking between them. ‘He’s funny’, some voice outside of her said, ‘in a dry, cynical way.’ What pained her most was the terrible realisation that she would have to justify him and their difference; reconcile it with her audience, herself. What lay behind that question, and iterations of it, was that thin, veiled word: *happiness*. Is he funny? meant, does he make you laugh? God knows why they’re together, she imagined her friends reporting back, which brought with it another wave of pain.

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Now, he was drumming his fingers to the beat of the radio’s static, interspersed with crinkling words: neurological, burden, night. His fingers, she noticed, were knobbly and thin, with fine hair blooming on his knuckles. How they had held, cleaned, fed her. How much of a stranger’s they looked in stale light. There was a short story she remembered reading, of a husband returning home from a fishing trip. His wife’s body is warm, sleeping, and he rubs his hands up and down her back, the same hands, she thinks, that he’d left her with two days ago. But in the morning, there are stories in the newspaper – of a dead girl found in a river. Why didn’t he tell her? she thinks, and she looks at his hands with a new, dawning horror. Raymond Carver, that was it. “So Much Water So Close to Home”. There was L’s breathing, his back, so undeniably his. And yet, how unsettling his knuckles looked the more she looked at them.

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Her phone buzzed. Liz, the woman whose AirBnB they were renting: ‘Key under doormat. Enjoy! :)’ She typed, ‘Thanks so much! Can’t wait!’

‘Who is it?’ he asked.

‘Liz, AirBnB. The key is under the doormat.’

She never used exclamation marks with her parents. Mostly, her sentences were a few words suspended in unpunctuated space: 'ma and pa can you send me a photo of birth cert thanks'. The last message she sent her mother was 'okay will check it out'. Often, her mother sent her a slew of articles—often conspiracies to do with water, pipes, washing vegetables—poems, updates. If she turned her data on, she knew her mother's messages would fill her WhatsApp unread: another picture of her brother's baby, the family in shades of red, her mother's pork ribs, the begonia's bloody petals—'What kind of person do you think Liz is?' he asked.

'Middle-aged, thinning hair, muffin-top?' she said, looking at him for approval.

But L frowned. 'That's very generic,' he said. Almost confessionally, 'You're probably right.'

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As a child, he collected rocks and named them, he told her, on one of their first dates. This was when banalities about each other was still something to be collected, filed away like treasure.

She drank boiled water and doused herself in showers every evening. He bit his lip on the phone before saying, 'love you Mum.'

Now, she also knew the face he pulled before an argument; eyes squinted to thin pinpricks, the mouth hacked and grim.

Now, she knew more about herself than she had ever known; that she held her hands as if cradling eggs, that she would close one eye when she was sleepy. That she was hysterical and always in fits of laughter with friends; but always somber, contemplative with him. Perhaps it was this that bound people together; how they named things, how their edges became defined by someone else.

A month after they met, she dreamt she was home again. She was cross-legged, upstairs in one of the bedrooms. The windows were flung open, and her feet was stretched out in front of her. There was something wrong with them. She couldn't move. With dread, her hand reached out, stretched a patch of skin on her sole; as if to inspect veins, the tautness of it. And there—a terrible, coiling thing, the scales of a baby snake squirming beneath her flesh. Rolling like a bike spoke, in the flat of her foot.

She told him about the dream, at the time, with a misplaced bravado. They had spent one day at Carlton Gardens psychoanalysing it. He insisted on throwing words at her to determine nascent meaning; park, snake, man, until she regretted telling him at all. It's simple, she had wanted to stay. I can't move with you in my foot.

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'What was the last dream you had?' she asked suddenly. She had the urge to feel his thoughts close to hers, bare and skinned and alive. They were on the road, just the two of them; they could talk about anything they liked. She remembered mornings like this; when the sun cast brick light on the carpet of her bedroom, how her feet lay rested in his. A simple prospect like coffee, a walk, became an event; and

later, she would dedicate her journal to a single sentence, a single line, captured.

'I can't remember,' he said, glancing at her, 'it was probably about my thesis.'

Whatever he saw on her face didn't reassure him. He continued, 'You know, I've told you about them.'

He had. He would wake up, sweating.

He dreamt of the blank face of his supervisor, gazing at him while he garbled in bird song. He dreamt of words that held no etymologies, strings of phrases that melted when written down.

'Right,' she said. 'I dreamt I choked on a mentos.' Looked at him, looking at the road.

'Yeah?' he said.

'Yeah, I tried to say something, swallowed bottles of water.'

'Then what happened?'

'Nothing, that's how it ended.' Wanted to say: I failed to flush away the stone. I think the blank face of your supervisor, the silence strangling me; they're part of the same thing.

Said, instead, 'aren't you curious about my dream?'

'What do you mean?' he asked defensively.

'Well, I'm telling you that I dreamt about choking. Don't you want to know what it could mean?'

He looked at her oddly, cocked his head, as if to ask: what mood are you in?

'Why does it matter? I was being curious, I thought.'

She could feel something rising in her throat. The engine was spluttering, sounding like someone hacking up a furball—eh, eh, eh.

'It could *mean* something,' she said, ignoring him. 'Remember, you used to analyse my dreams.'

'What is *up* with you?' he asked, almost to himself.

The road was beginning to blur a fanatic green, and the air peeled back. Something about it made her want to feel the silence of them ripped open.

'Nothing's *up* with me', she said. 'You just don't seem curious at all.'

She could see it already: pulling into the driveway, the paint of the house peeling. The melting dumpling wrappers, the lino curling heat. The lounge, bright but dusty; like a school hall, or a ballet class. The upholstered, floral patterned sofas, the turquoise-themed crockery on beige countertops, the porcelain Siamese cats arranged on the bedside table.

'I'm just not in the mood,' he said finally, his irritation blistering like a sore.

They would fold their dumplings with fragility; him with a careful irritation, and her, with a growing anxiety to soothe the night. They would eat in murmured appreciation; break open dumpling skins until pork and cabbage burnt their mouths. They would lie in bed, waiting for sleep to escape each other, until the day began again. Nothing particularly unbearable, but thinking about it; how the hours slunk and slipped and deflated, made it more so. What was it that Irish Murdoch said in the opening of *The Bell*? 'Dora left her husband because she was afraid of him. She decided six months later to return to him for the same reason.'

'Look at that horse,' L said abruptly, pointing to a paddock. The grass was wild and thin, like a whip. In the middle stood a clydesdale; strong and somber, turning its face to watch them fly past momentarily. She imagined unbuckling her seatbelt, flinging the door open like a gaping mouth, and soaring, falling in front of its great big hooves.

With great effort, she turned to him. 'I want to be alone,' she imagined herself saying. But then, he would leave her here; stranded, hours away from any public transport. She would never see him again, he would become frozen, idealised, in youth. And for what? A feeling? Silly, silly, silly. 'I don't want to be here,' she could say. At least then, it was unclear whether it was the place or the person, and she could defer both for some other time. Or: 'I want to go home.' She didn't know which, if any of the three, were true.

'What do you mean?' he would say. But no, he wouldn't be so cruel. Maybe a sigh, a hollow resignation. 'Can we go in the morning? We've just gotten here.' Yes, he would say something like that. Always so practical, reliable. He would let pain wash over him. He would nullify it with responsibility.

In her dreams, he looked at her, almost sadly. 'This wasn't a good idea,' he would say. And she would wait for him to elaborate, to tell her he was driving home—without her—but here they were, together, the car hurtling terribly forward.

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She found herself curdled, sheepishly weak, while L's hands stayed glued to the wheel. Sometimes he looked at her, a little tentatively, as if he wanted his presence to be thin and light; to behold her without her knowing. 'They make great pies,' he said, as they drove past a town centre, a flapping bakery. Then, nothing else.

While L brought their bags in, finding the key, indeed, under the doormat, she stayed in the car. Suddenly, she liked the solidity, the passivity of being in the passenger seat. Slowly, with effort, she extracted herself out. The air was cool, the sun had begun to recede behind clouds. For a moment, it peeked through; spotlighted the fields with something like warmth. But then it receded again, and the grass resumed its limp and dry appearance, like split ends. She walked to the cottage's border, where the WiFi was weak and barely flickering. In the green, a hundred metres from the kitchen window, she could see L's hunched back opening cupboards, emptying the cooler bag onto the table.

Her mother *had* sent her a picture of their lunch at the Shanghainese restaurant. 'Looks good,' she typed, and the tick—within moments—turned blue. Incoming: Mama. She watched her mother's icon, a photo of the sea; jiggle up and down on her screen: SLIDE UP, it hissed. SLIDE UP.

He was still unpacking; she could see the glow of the fridge. He would nap, perhaps. Wait for her to become brighter.

She knew what would happen if she answered. First, there would be static, a muffling, an Aljazeera reporter blaring out news, and her mother, going

'Hello?' Two decibels too loud; her mouth pressed to the receiver, and the feedback echoing on speakerphone.

'Yes, Ma, I can hear you,' she would say.

Hello—we just had our lunch—did you see the pictures?—and then her father would be heard in the background: my darling!—her mother would press on—we had those fungus mushrooms, the ones you like, and then the xiaolong bao—did you see the photos?—yes, he’s so big now—no, nothing else on—just watching TV—maybe we’ll go for a walk—what are you doing there?—Aunty Sharina wants to wish you a happy new year—I’ll send you her number so you can reply—aiyah, it won’t take that long—you’re making dumplings?—reply to Aunty Doris, okay?—I sent her a picture of you, she said you’re so big and pretty, lor —what, you’re going now?—okay—happy new year—oh, Papi says, happy new year too—do you want to talk to him?—here, I’ll pass you on—

She could imagine it; the routineness of this love.

Slowly, she pressed her finger against the screen, watched it drag the icon up. Connecting: 0:00. ‘Ma?’ she said. ‘Gong xi fa cai.’