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**‘The Expatriates: Short stories’ and
‘The Possibilities of Expatriate Fiction: Exegesis’**

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VOLUME I

The Expatriates: Short Stories

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Abstract

This is a creative writing PhD thesis comprised of two related parts: the short story cycle ‘The Expatriates’ and its accompanying exegesis ‘The Possibilities of Expatriate Fiction’. Both the short story cycle and the exegesis explore the possibilities of expatriate fiction – here meaning fictional works that are either about expatriates or written by writers living abroad.

‘The Expatriates’ is a cycle of eight short stories. Animated by Walter Benjamin’s notion of the seafaring merchant as a teller of stories from afar, and aspiring to fictional virtues of movement and lightness, these stories seek to render contemporary experiences of living ‘abroad’ – in the original sense of being at large, or the contemporary sense of being in another country.

Trading in themes of escape and reinvention, the collection features varied settings: a mill town in southeastern New South Wales; two cities in Japan; the back rooms of Heathrow Airport; an artists’ colony in Spain; an apartment in Moscow; a Sydney café; and an unnamed, Mars-like planet. Rather than treating these settings as exceptionally exotic, however, the stories reveal specific instantiations of modernity, or what Drusilla Modjeska calls ‘the stuff of (modern) lives’ (*Timepieces* 209).

The exegesis, ‘The possibilities of expatriate fiction’, turns first to twentieth-century depictions of modern, mobile lives. Whereas longstanding critical traditions describe Christina Stead and Mavis Gallant as ‘expatriate’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ writers without

examining how these commitments manifested in their works, this study reveals the authors' distinctive cosmopolitanisms.

One chapter examines the cosmopolitan character of Stead's *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946), an interloper's novel of New York that was written in the tradition of European picaresque narratives. Another reads two of Gallant's early stories, 'Travellers Must Be Content' (1959) and 'The Cost of Living' (1962), as depicting not only the opportunities but also the costs of an expatriate existence, foregrounding notions of costliness and economy. The comparative discussion of these texts reveals a range of ambivalent states and negotiations with ideas of the nation and belonging.

A concluding chapter turns to the implications of expatriatism and cosmopolitanism for a contemporary writer. Surveying recent re-readings of these concepts in critical and literary theory, it builds on Shameem Black's defence of the possibility of 'noninvasive imaginative acts' that 'question, rather than inevitably reinscribe, the inequalities and injustices of a globalizing world' (65). Offering an account of the overlapping concerns and tactics in 'The Expatriates', it maps a provisional ethos and terrain for a fiction that evokes new expatriate states.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Jo Lennan, November 2017

The Expatriates: Short Stories

1. High Country

When I was ten, almost eleven, my father shaved off his beard, letting the clippings drop onto pages of the *Herald*. We had moved to a new town where the locals did not like hippies and where shop windows carried signs declaring ‘Greens Cost Jobs’. There were two Fifties motels, a plinth for the World Wars, and a swimming pool for use during the dry summers. There was also a timber mill and a Mobil service station, with a flat roof that fell in one year after heavy snows. At the red-brick primary school, my teacher was Mr Sedden, who peered at us like we were beasts and wouldn’t give me my pen licence. He didn’t give a reason and I felt it was unjust, being made to go on scratching resentfully in pencil long after the others were allowed to write in ink.

Why did we move there? Not many people did, and the men in the town complained that all the women moved away. But my parents, outdoor types, lived in fear of suburbia, and they moved every so often to some neglected backwater, somewhere that butted up against the wild places of the state. We had decamped from the coast because development had threatened, meaning specifically the building of a supermarket. My dad had taken a job at the high school in the town, teaching science subjects and sometimes agriculture. We had the novelty of a house on the edge of fields where, when the weather cooled, the grass frosted over. Dad promptly set about making improvements to the house, and for a time we had no front door, only a tarpaulin, and my mother cooked dinner wearing a ski jacket.

For a friend I had Bea Coffey, who lived on a property out of town. She taught me to ride her motorbike, a Yamaha Peewee 80. I rode it forgetting to take the brake off, crawling so slowly that I keeled over on the dirt. Usually she doubled me, setting her face against the wind. Bea had the magnificence of a Viking figurehead, except that her orange hair did not stream out behind her, having been scraped back severely with hair gel and water. As well as the Peewee 80, she'd once had a pony, but her parents had sold it. Her older sister had trained Quincy to bite people on the arms, and then he was palmed off on some fools in Bibbenluke, a family who wanted a dressage pony for their son.

We liked to try to climb the ridge, a distant stair-like rise of hills. We didn't ask permission. There was no one to ask. Bea's parents were away. They were avid travellers, and even when they were home they lived like expatriates in their own country, full of poetic sentiments about the beauty of the landscape. When they were away, Bea was left in the care of her uncle, Mr Coffey. He was bearded and scowled a lot because his wife had left him. He was stern at the dinner table, getting me in trouble for feeding the cocker spaniel: 'What do you think you're doing? It's bad manners and unhygienic.' I resented the dressing-down. I knew about dogs and bacteria. I had been careful not to touch the spaniel's mouth under the table, but being too cowed to say anything in my defence, I had to sit there accused of being ill-bred and uncouth.

In the morning, when we set out, Mr Coffey was still asleep. Not because he was lazy; Bea said he'd been up all night trying to deliver a calf that got all twisted. 'It died,' she concluded. 'He had to shoot the mother.' And going onto the veranda, we saw the long rubber gloves he had washed and laid out to dry. We examined them clinically, the left and then the right, noting the traces that remained of blood and bovine fluids. Death fascinated us. So did the cruelty of nature, which from then on became linked in my mind with Mr Coffey, who had shot a heifer dead in a paddock while we slept.

Heading to the shed, we passed Bea's cousin Benny. He was crashing a Matchbox car into an old tire. Three years younger than Bea, and with darker orange hair, he was often said to be either special or slow. He wasn't just mute but mildly brain-damaged as well, and had a teaching assistant to help in the classroom. When he heard Bea telling me we might swim in the river coming back, he signed to ask if he could come. 'Sorry,' she told him. 'You won't fit on the bike.' He glared at us sulkily and kicked a post as we rode off, but we quickly forgot him as we made for the ridge. We jolted over the tussocks and dropped into sudden gullies. These were curious dappled places where, when summer came and the stock were being mustered, a stray sheep would often peel off from the mob and have to be chased out again, or seized by Mr Coffey and slung across his lap as he rode his motorbike up a bank into the clear.

At the foot of the ascent, we abandoned the Peewee 80. The climb, over craggy ground, was surprisingly difficult. The rise gave way to more hidden drops and twisting crevasses. There were lichen-coloured boulders in sage and salmon tones. The trees stood as sentinels, their trunks shining white against the blue sub-alpine sky. There was a sense of arriving late on the scene, like walking onto a stage after a play has ended, but the bush kept its secrets. The only signs of life we found were a cluster of white bones, which Bea declared matter-of-factly were 'animal, not human.' A lamb had sickened or gone lame and been taken by a fox, but the predator itself was nowhere to be seen.

We carried on in the rising heat. Not halfway up, however, we were defeated by the ridge. The way we had taken had brought us to a chasm, which dropped away sharply at our feet. We had a clear view to the west, where the fields had the blank non-colour of jute sacking. The autumn sky was large and uninterrupted. This was the vast dry dominion of Bea's family, the Coffeys. In the midst of it, past the rut of the riverbed, sat the house. Backed by giant pines that from a distance looked quite small, and built on the

foundations of the original homestead, it was a yellow stucco oblong not unlike a pat of butter, squished outwards in the middle where the windows formed a curve. The house had been built as a monument to a long wool boom. Up close, it revealed signs of neglect – the peeling paint, the cracks that hinted at subsidence – but distance gave it the neatness of an architect’s miniature. Further on yet, out of sight, obscured by foothills, was the approach to the alps and Mt Kosciuszko. Kosciuszko, a famous Pole, had led his people in rising up against the might of Russia and Prussia, but in true democratic fashion we bastardised his name, giving it four syllables instead of the Polish three. *Kossie Osko*.

It was hot and we wanted to swim. We made a scrambling descent. Finding the motorbike where we’d left it, we rode back to the river. It showed the cracked earth of a thirty-year drought, but there was still enough water to dunk under at one bend. There we swam and sunned ourselves in front of some unmoved cows. Getting back to the house at dusk, we found Benny had been busy. His clothes were wet and muddy and he wore a defiant look. He too had wanted to swim, and while his dad was out working and we were adventuring, he had used the hose to flood a ditch and make a swimming pool of his own. In so doing, he had emptied the water tank by the house. ‘Benny! What have you done?’ Bea called. ‘Your dad’s going to be mad. He’ll have to buy water now!’

Bea’s uncle was coming back. We heard his tread on the veranda, then the pause as he pulled his boots off by the door. Having come from around the side, he hadn’t yet seen Benny’s pool, but it wasn’t going to take him long to realise what had happened.

‘Come on,’ Bea told me, ‘let’s go wait for your mum.’

Not hanging around to hear the ominous clanking of the pipes, which would be Mr Coffey attempting to wash his hands, we slipped outside to wait for my mother’s car. And it happened to be just then that she arrived to pick me up, bumping over the cattle grate

and looking relieved to have remembered the way. I was relieved as well. On this occasion I was spared Mr Coffey's wrath, but even in the abstract the prospect was terrible.

*

To my mind, Mr Coffey was like the troll under the bridge in the fairytale. He was a foe, an opponent. He owned all the land, all the places we wanted so much to explore, and he definitely didn't want to let me pass. When he lost his temper it was like a roar from under the bridge: *Who's that walking on my bridge?*

I wasn't the only one to take a dark view of him. Mr Coffey was widely known for being a bad farmer. There were countless marks against him. He had allowed footrot to persist in some of his stock when he should have put them in quarantine or slaughtered them straight off, and it was alleged he'd let it spread to a neighbour's farm. In selling off some of his land, he'd divided up the parcels without thought to the future, leaving sections stranded without proper rights of way. He didn't go to LandCare meetings, didn't sit on the committee as Secretary or Treasurer, and this was at a time when LandCare was more or less the de facto support group for drought-stricken farmers. Much later I heard he knew the site of a mass grave where Aboriginal people had been killed by his forebears, but had never reported it or had it investigated.

He was the eldest son of the eldest son. He didn't want – hadn't asked for – any of it. The odd thing was that he had many of the talents farmers were supposed to have. He was a crack shot, for example. At that time there was a lot of talk about gun accidents on farms, which was code for suicide. Mr Coffey was too good with guns for anyone to believe him capable of an accident, and maybe that was what saved him from giving it a

go. But more likely he didn't care what people thought, and he kept going because he had to, because he had Benny.

His wife's departure was still fresh. She had left for good reason, people muttered, but they despised her for leaving the boy. They said it went to show the cruelty of the rich. This was already a widely-held belief, which fed on the fact that wealthy farmers sent their children to boarding schools. 'My mum says if you send your kids away you don't deserve to have them,' a girl in our class told Bea. She got worse from a kid named Adam McDonagh, the son of one of the truck drivers who brought logs to the mill. He puffed himself up like a rooster and called her 'the rich bitch with a big garden.'

'It's called a *farm*,' Bea told him archly, because she wasn't a weakling. As the year went on, however, I noticed the way she tried to say 'I seen' for 'I saw' and 'twenny' for 'twenty', although sometimes she slipped and accidentally pronounced the 't'.

This was in the Nineties, though you wouldn't have known it. The Eighties died hard in that corner of the world. The schoolyard we knew was riven by class. Everybody knew who would be going away to school and who would attend the local high school down the road. This was the divide that ran through everything; it was the source of more cruelty than our teachers knew. Animosity ran deep because jobs were under threat. The logging of old-growth forests was out of favour in the cities, and there had been calls to put a stop to the convoys of lorries that growled up the winding roads bearing enormous logs shorn of branches and leaves. Between the town and the coast, at a point equidistant from Sydney and Melbourne, and last in the pincer movement of felling and settlement, stood one of the last great old-growth forests of the eastern seaboard.

Not much of this was noticed by the adults around us. We were acquaintances to our parents, leading what felt like separate lives. My parents barbecued and dined with other schoolteachers, all of whom seemed to be building mud-brick and straw-bale

houses. They were not on the dinner circuit of Bea's parents and their friends, people who gathered in tall-ceilinged rooms and plonked down heirloom platters with reckless inattention. Living at the edge of town, we were neither one thing nor the other, neither landed farmers nor working class. When I voiced my dislike of Adam McDonagh to my mother, she told me, 'Rowan, you're a snob.' She threw out this accusation in an impulsive way. I was taken aback and thought the reproach unjust. Not long before, I had heard Bea's mother say, 'Well, you can't like *everyone*,' a philosophy that struck me as true and liberating. But an attitude like that would never have cut it with my mother. She usually smoothed over negative feelings, restricting herself to gradations of pleasantness.

I didn't know at the time that my father's father, Snow, had been a shearer and wool-classer elsewhere in the state. In the off-seasons he ran a string of failed ventures, from a laundry in Moree to a corner shop. All I knew was that he had died racing a train, an event I envisioned like a Charlie Chaplin film sequence complete with giddy piano music. In the shot, the light-haired Snow gripped the wheel of a big black car. He tore along the tracks while from behind (also in frame) a huffing engine bore down on him. Years later I had to revise this cinematic vision when I saw a news report about a motorist's death at a rail crossing. Hearing that the crossing had no boom gate, bell or light, I realised *racing the train* did not mean what I'd thought it meant.

In class we were schooled to fear what could do us harm – other Chaplinesque dangers that were standard issue in country towns. These were strange men, dams and silos, roughly in that order. We were told about children who had fallen into silos, how they had flailed about and drowned, their mouths filling with grain. The dangers were real enough, but they didn't apply to us: there were no crops in the area, so no one had a silo. As for dams, we had better options – a river that swelled with melted snow each spring, and a municipal swimming pool with its lycra and flesh parade. That left only

strange men, but there were no strangers in the town, and if any were to come they would be easy to spot.

At the end of that year, we broke for the holidays. Summer came. So did the shearers. They moved from one property to the next, dossing in sheds and staying a week or two as needed. There was mustering to be done, sheep to rout from gullies. It was also when Bea made the startling announcement that she would be away next year, globetrotting with her parents and home-schooling herself from books. She gave me this news when I went over for a visit. Her parents were cooling their heels at home to prepare for the big trip, and also supervising while her uncle went away, taking Benny to see doctors in Canberra and Sydney. They hadn't left yet, which made it a full house at the Coffeys'. There was Bea's slight, elegant mother, and her father, a charmer in a battered Akubra hat. Spinning it on his finger, he boasted about how he used to fly light planes, tempting fate by flying so low over the plateau that the tops of the trees all but stroked his fuselage. He spoke of flying to Melbourne to go to the races, where, on Cup Day one year in the scorching heat, the crowd had started a bidding war for his hat. 'This old thing!' (Another whirl.) 'But of course I wouldn't sell it.'

He recounted this story over his toast in the breakfast room, before going out to help the men in the shearing shed. From a crowded shelf by my elbow, I picked up a pewter cup that commemorated his win in the 1968 Thredbo Ski Club Egg And Spoon Race. I could imagine his youthful self dashing over the finish line, extending his spoon before him like a fencer's foil, but on looking closer I was surprised to see the engraved lettering read 'S. Coffey' – for the other Mr Coffey, Bea's forbidding uncle. It was hard to imagine him engaging in the high silliness of an egg and spoon race in the snow. Yet the trophy showed that he had – and that he'd excelled at it.

Then Bea's sister Anna slouched out of her room. She had come back to stay as well, freed from the coop of her university college. She was in jeans and a Bonds singlet, and she refused to have anything but coffee for breakfast. Later I saw her shearing, looking heroic and bored at once, reaching over to brace a ewe and hold it by a foreleg, ploughing the whirring shears over its grey flank and then flinging the loosened fleece onto the pile. She was more than impressive; she struck me as a new ideal of womanhood, suggesting ways of living I hadn't considered. The same day, at lunch, she made it known over the table that she was seeing a married man, to which her mother said wearily, 'Don't think you can shock me,' while Mr Coffey winked and spoke about his new scheme, a plan to replant the river banks with native seedlings.

The elder Mr Coffey, the egg-and-spoon-race winner, ate in the dining room by himself. He was very fastidious, eating his tomato soup and swallowing each mouthful without any sign of pleasure. No one commented on the fact that he ate alone. It wasn't treated as unusual, and no one wanted his company.

*

Before the start of term, some newcomers showed up. They were three Filipina women, each toting a child or children from a former relationship. Together or separately, through methods unclear, each of these women had met or been matched with a man from our town to marry. Their school-aged sons came to our school, and the eldest, named Moses, took the desk next to mine. He was good-looking, with glossy hair, and smelt of lemon soap. He tried out my name, rendering it as 'Rowing' and laughing like this was funny. He was quick to ingratiate himself, copying the way I arranged things on my desk and regularly flashing a movie-star-white smile.

When I went to his house one Saturday, I found a barbecue in full swing. The TV and radio were playing the football, and sun-leathered adults were relaxing in pastel chairs. They were a tribe of people unknown to me until then, and moving easily among them was Moses's mother, who was plump with pregnancy but still light on her feet. She laughed when someone told her, 'Take a load off, love.' Moses's stepfather, a speckled man with hazel eyes, introduced me to everyone. Then we went our own way, walking over to the pool. This was a place of spectacle, for strutting and showing off. It was a natural stage for Moses. He was stocky and smooth-skinned, with a flat-footed way of walking. He was otter-like in the water, diving and swimming. He drew glances from girls and boys and liked the attention. When we stretched out our towels to lay on the grass, he glowed in the greenish shade of the liquidambar trees that rose as a wobbling mass of light against the tall dark pines.

We existed outside the social order, or that was what I thought. We didn't have to pick sides. We were exempt from the usual rules. Did Moses know better? In line at the newsagent's one time, we heard two men talking. They were discussing Moses's mum and her compatriots. One was Adam McDonagh's dad, a surprisingly skinny man. He referred to the women as 'mail-order brides.' The other man said he wasn't sure they were, to which Mr McDonagh said, 'You're right, what they are is whores, the three whores of Manila.' His friend then amiably observed that Manila had more than just three whores, and both of them laughed until they saw we were standing there, and then the girl at the till said, 'Can I help you, please?'

Moses rarely spoke of his life before the move, and we definitely never spoke about his father. At school, the three Filipino boys were referred to as cousins, but Moses said of the other two, Lester and John Roberto, 'I had never even met them until we came here.' Mostly he asked me questions, of which he had many. What was the demountable

building next door to the pool? That was where they gave classes to the Long-Term Unemployed, I said. Who were they? he asked, but I didn't know much more, just that the building's patrons were all men in their middle years.

Like this the year went on. I rarely thought of Bea. I couldn't picture on her travels, having no way to imagine the places she was to visit. We weren't likely, then or later, to swap long, descriptive letters. We were friends in the way that brothers are often friends, which is simply to say that we did things together, riding a Peewee 80 or climbing a ridge. I would fill in the details after she came back. The donkey she rode at Nice, plodding along the Promenade des Anglais and secretly digging in her heels to try to get it to break into a gallop. The village school in Haute-Garonne where she daydreamed away her time rather than learn more than a lick of French. The gondolas of Venice and their sultry gondoliers, who reliably fell in love with her porcelain-skinned mother. And so on and so forth, from one country to the next.

In class, I realised that Moses was brilliant. He lagged behind in English but rivalled me in maths, and on questions of pop culture he took pre-eminence. He was coming into his full powers when our school had a visit from a celebrity, Max Markson, the host of a TV game show. He had been hired by the government to promote a plan for what would be called the Very Fast Train, or VFT. It would connect Sydney to Melbourne and put our town on the map, he said. It was pork-barrelling, Mr Seddon said cryptically, but Ms Lurie, our Year Six teacher, gushed over Markson, saying, 'A *won*-derful idea.' She looked nicer than usual, in a skirt suit with a houndstooth check. Markson went on to give us some showbiz pep and dazzle – screening a video, unfurling maps, and finally presiding over a trivia showdown. This was when Moses streaked ahead to take first prize, a pair of Levis 501s. I won second prize, a pencil case with a train logo. I had wanted the

jeans but couldn't begrudge Moses, who afterwards teamed them with thongs in all weather.

When spring came, Ms Lurie said she wanted to teach us about life. She had us foster some chicks that had been hatched in an incubator; we were to raise them for six weeks before the high school reclaimed them. We housed them in cardboard pens at the back of the classroom, with a light on a timer to keep them warm at night. But one day I noticed something wrong with mine. It started acting strangely, jerking compulsively as if to look over its wing. The other chicks noticed; they began to nip at it. That night, as a cold wind whistled through the pines, I lay awake worrying in my draughty add-on room. Lying facedown with my arms crossed underneath me – this was how I slept, to trap my body heat – I prayed that the chick would throw off its affliction.

The next morning I went in early. My chick had died during the night; its downy body was stiff and cold and its eyes were squeezed shut in an expression of concentration. I looked around the classroom. Empty. There was nobody to see when I switched the tag from the dead chick's leg for that of a living one, a vigorous little bundle bearing Adam McDonagh's name. Having made the swap, I took my newly-acquired charge and sat with it at my desk. It was a lesson about life, although not the one Ms Lurie had intended. My fascination with death had paled; how could it compete with life, the thrill of a living thing with a beating heart?

The bell rang and students entered. They mobbed the cardboard pens. 'One's dead!' someone exclaimed. 'It's Adam's. Look, it's dead!'

'What?' said Adam, barging over. When he saw the fuzzy corpse, he refused to accept it. I had never seen anyone so shocked. 'But... but...' he said, faltering. He let out a violent, ugly sob. He couldn't help it or disguise it, and it was followed by more sobs. His grief was liquid and convulsive, a force of tears, mucus and spittle. Ms Lurie could

not console him, not for all the coloured stickers in her storeroom or the world. He shouted that he hated chickens and hated Ms Lurie even more, and then he stormed out of the room and downhill to the road, where he tore the budding roses off the bushes by the fence.

Moses knew my secret. He had seen the weakness in my chick. But he never let on to Adam McDonagh, not even when they started to have more to do with each other, playing in the same football side on Saturday mornings. He kept my secret as I later kept his, and when we had our school assembly at the end of the term, I stood centre-stage with the grown chicken and accepted the applause as if I had earned it.

*

The end of that year came with a run of sweltering days. Bea came back from her travels like Christopher Columbus; she gave me her report as if to the king of Spain. Her journeys had made her into a sophisticate, and she thought nothing of wearing a crop top with her bike shorts. She showed me the sanitary pads she had taken from the plane, saying, 'They're these amazing long cushions you put in your undies.'

'Great,' I said. 'What for?'

'Oh, anything,' Bea said.

We tried them out that afternoon on the motorbike. Beforehand, she and Benny had to tinker with the bike. When I went inside to find some food for us to take, she asked me to grab her boots and socks. 'Not the good socks,' she added. But when I stood at the tallboy drawer, I faced an impossible dilemma: here were untold pairs of socks, an abundance of spots and stripes and colours. Forced to make a choice, I picked the least appealing, a pair in plain white cotton. Then I went on past the dining room where Bea's

uncle was eating lunch. Something about him checked my stride. I hadn't seen him in a year, and he somehow came into focus as a person in his own right; as someone making an effort, drawing himself up, summoning the will to go on with his work. Then, going on unobserved, I scrounged in the kitchen, selecting and pocketing some Italian chocolate truffles.

Out at the shed, Bea and Benny were focused on the Peewee 80. I was used to seeing Bea leave her cousin out, but now their closeness surprised me. They were squatting in the dirt with their heads together. Benny had taken off the shift lever, found a buckled washer and hammered it flat again. As I approached, he finished putting the parts back. When Bea turned, she saw the socks. 'Those are my school socks,' she said, and she took them and turned them over in her hands like stones. I understood that *school* did not mean our school, but the one she would start at in a few weeks' time. She added, 'It doesn't matter,' though her tone told me it did.

Off we went. It was like before, but better cushioned: we hurtled over the tussocked ground, the air rushed to meet us, and the stepped ridge drew close. It was the day we came closest to reaching the top. Or not *we*, because Bea's boots gave her blisters halfway up. I left her airing her feet on a flat rock in the shade, struck uphill alone in an effort to reach the summit, and after climbing for a while thought I had made it. Then I saw two things that stopped me in my tracks. One was a sharp ravine that dropped away not far ahead, dooming my hopes of ascending further. The other was the animal that stood between me and the chasm, having just loped into view. It was a fox with an orange coat, a supple elongated body and a curious frank gaze that it turned in my direction. We had surprised each other, and it stopped to fix me with a look of naked appraisal.

I acted instinctively. I kept my eyes on the fox. I felt in my pocket for a softened chocolate truffle and set it on the ground between us as a tribute. It was a disloyal act

because the Coffeys hated foxes, but I was already acting from an allegiance to something else. I didn't want to be like them, something I wasn't; I hoped to be something else again that I hadn't yet defined. The fox watched with interest, ears pricked and alert. Taking several steps back, I ceded the ledge and went back the way I'd come. Returning to an impatient Bea, I didn't tell her about the fox. And I didn't let on that I had failed to reach the top, that the peak had once again decided to remain aloof. Going the rest of the way back down, we found the motorbike where we'd left it. 'It was the washer,' Bea said, lifting it off the ground. 'Behind the switch lever. It had bent out of shape. That's why it wasn't changing gear.'

'Benny's good with bikes,' I said.

'He's better than a mechanic.'

It occurred to me to ask why Benny was the way he was. When Bea answered that it was 'an accident of birth,' I envisioned her cousin as a slippery newborn baby being dropped on his head by a careless doctor, or perhaps by his father. I recalled the rubber gloves we had seen after the night of the twisted calf, bearing the traces of blood and fluids, obvious signs of the sliminess of birth. I said it sounded like a thing that could happen to anyone.

*

There were truths as eternal as lichen-covered boulders. The Very Fast Train did not arrive. My parents moved us on almost absentmindedly, and I started high school in a different part of the state. The remaining old-growth forests of the south coast were preserved; public feeling grew strong enough to take care of that. Bea worked her way through a string of jobs, still saying twenty instead of twenny. Moses was more successful

at the reinvention game. He remade himself as the town's favourite son: in high school, he was school captain; in adulthood, a member of the Returned Services League club, a ringleader in dirt-biking and pig-shooting expeditions, a go-to organiser of buck's nights and weekends, and a paintball team commander in full camouflage gear. He worked as a foreman at the mill, where closure was threatened many times, then averted by the arrival of cheap plantation pine.

I saw Mr Coffey, Benny's dad, years later in Sydney. In fact, I saw him twice. The first time, on a bus in Sydney's inner west, he was helping a guy who was freaking out on ice and verbally abusing the female bus driver. Talking the youth down, Mr Coffey kept saying, 'Now son, now son,' as if soothing a frightened cow. His manner was so gentle, so caring, that I was struck by the difference between this man and his younger self. *Now son, now son*. The tenderness of it somehow made me feel like crying. Before he could see me, I got off the bus through the back door. This was something that Moses had shown me, years ago: that it is easy to disappear in the midst of a commotion.

The second time I saw Mr Coffey, he saw me first. We were at the bottom end of King Street near the auto repair shop. His face lit up; he took out his earbuds – he had been listening to something on Radio National – and told me he lived nearby in a flat with his son. He took care of Benny, who had a disability pension, but on Tuesdays he had a break when the Samaritans woman came. He asked after my parents, remembering their names and pronouncing them carefully, as if for the first time.

I didn't ask about his wife. I don't know if they were in touch. I knew by then what his property had come to: the sale of parcels of land, in a piecemeal way at first, then finally the last clutch of paddocks with the house. He'd been freed from one duty to assume another.

‘And you’ve done well,’ he said. He knew I had gone into law. He was pleased for me, generously so. Standing before him, I felt like such a fraud – like I was once again standing there holding a grown chicken, a living thriving thing to which I had no right.

That stupid chicken. I had never stopped feeling guilty. I had swapped a dead chicken for a live one, one loyalty for another, and I couldn’t shake the thought that in doing what I did I had opened the way to the ugly thing that happened later.

‘How’s Benny?’ I was hesitant about asking.

‘He has his moments. Don’t we all.’ He shifted and smiled. ‘You wouldn’t have seen him since the accident.’ There was the slightest of pauses before he said ‘accident’, and my heart plummeted as I realised he knew. He knew what the boys had done, and he knew that I knew too.

‘You can see him if you like. If you don’t need to go, that is.’ A shadow crossed his features as he worried that he was imposing. He tried to give me a way out. ‘Next time. You’re in a hurry.’

I wanted to run away, not go around for a cup of tea. I was afraid to go with him. I was afraid to see Benny. I felt responsible, complicit. But the troll under the bridge was offering me a way across. ‘No,’ I said. ‘No, I’ll come. I’d like to.’

He smiled again and said alright and untangled his earbuds, then we fell into step together. He was not unhappy, I realised. That was the difference. It opened something in me to see him so transformed, because I realised what despair could do to a person, what a disfiguring force unhappiness could be.

*

That in-between summer, we had all glimpsed something of the future, the lives to which we would lay claim. All except for Benny, perhaps, who had his future decided for him. It happened on a Sunday at the swimming pool. He stood behind the block, waiting for his turn to dive. He watched the kid in front make a slick efficient entry and didn't notice Moses and Adam, sidling up and swapping glances. As he stepped onto the block, they mouthed *one, two, three* and pushed. They were a half-moment too early to push him clear into the pool, so his foot caught and he tripped, windmilling forward. It was another Chaplin sequence, this time in lurid colour. Benny's block was near the edge, and the angle at which he fell meant his head struck the side. His arm hit the edge too; I winced to think of the graze he'd get. Then he was facedown in the water and his head was bleeding, releasing an ink-red plume into the turquoise pool.

This was the moment when things changed again for Benny, when his mild brain damage became something more severe. He lay in a coma in Canberra Hospital for three months. He had swelling of the brain that would certainly have killed him if not for the quick action of a visiting specialist, a South African surgeon who was an expert in head trauma. He excised a four-inch section from the front of Benny's skull, then sewed the flap of skin back over his forehead. His brain expanded to fill the gap where the bone had been. When the swelling went down, Benny woke up and the doctors patched his skull with a special metal plate.

I saw what happened at the pool. I saw Moses jerk backwards. Adam McDonagh shrivelled, losing his bantam chest. Their movements brought other movements, which came in quick succession. Two bigger boys running over and lifting Benny from the water. Mr Seddon rushing over, dropping an apple he'd been eating. And then the man who ran the pool sprinting over too, soon to start the CPR he had once shown us on a dummy.

Shortly afterwards Mr Seddon, as the first adult on the scene, would ask me to write what I had witnessed. He was distracted as he gave me a pen and paper, too distracted in that moment to distrust what I would write. My statement was to be given to a policeman, who had already been called and was driving down from Cooma. Before I wrote anything, I saw Benny's dad through the chicken wire fence. He had just pulled into the carpark and was doing that thing he did, taking a breath and drawing himself up. He didn't know anything yet; he was oblivious. Then I turned to see Moses, who had so far gone unnoticed. He was standing in the shade by the liquidambar trees, close to the gathering knot of people and yet apart from them.

It was an accident, I thought. It could happen to anyone. Then I looked at the page and wrote what I had to say.

2. How Is Your Great Life?

At college, Arjun Mishra had the room across from Ana's. Then a devout boy with a liking for overalls, he had possessed an unflinching sense of what was 'fishy' or 'fancy', these being the words he used to express his disapproval. At their university, which catered to foreigners in Tokyo, they were both scholarship kids among wealthier students. Yet three years after graduation, when she telephoned her old friend, he was living the high life in ritzy Azabu. He worked in IT for a Japanese bank and rented an apartment whose rent, he was proud to say, was more than Priya Vajpayee's whole monthly pay-packet (Priya having been, at college, the student marked out for success).

It was a humid night in July, just past ten o'clock. 'So Ana,' Arjun boomed. 'How is your great life?' An hour and a half later, she fronted up to his building – a steel plate gave its name as the Imperial Satellite – and, entering, took the lift up to the eighth floor. In jeans and a T-shirt and with freshly combed-back hair, he opened the door with a blast from the air-conditioning unit. Letting her in, he gave her a key and a thick fold of yen 'for groceries or whatever'.

What could she do but take the money? She had no apartment and no job. She had fallen out with Shigeko, her flatmate and friend. She was waiting to receive a renewed Japanese visa, without which she could not find gainful employment. She didn't really want to go on hostessing, which was how she had made her living since her final year at college. She had never had a problem with what she did for work, but on recent dates with clients she had felt her smile grow wan and feeble, like a bulb about to blow. Worse, the greater her disaffection, the more some clients pursued her, perhaps attracted by what they took for an air of melancholy.

At least Arjun was too tactful to ask her awkward questions; it made it easier that he was brusque and businesslike. Pushing his hair back with his hand, he ran her through his week: on Tuesdays he fasted, on Wednesday nights he met friends for dinner, and on Fridays he went out to a strip club in Roppongi. Or that was what he had done last Friday, he added. Before that, he'd kept Friday evenings for cleaning and ironing. Now he was thinking of hiring a maid, a Filipina woman who would wash and iron his clothes and vacuum the apartment's fifteen tatami squares.

To Ana's immense relief, he didn't try to entertain her. He offered her the bed but she took the foldout futon, which she packed away each morning along with her possessions. She saw him when he was home late of an evening. At these times he poured red wine, cranked the aircon up to full and settled on the couch in an expansive mood. He often spoke about his work and his colleagues at the bank. 'This is consumer banking,' he told her with a shrug. 'It's not a huge amount of money, a few million a branch. The technology is ancient. We're talking 1998, 1999. I was in high school then. When the system goes down, most times it's the temperature. Sometimes the branches don't have dedicated server rooms. The idiots don't realise, they put their coffee cups on the servers, turn off the AC when they leave. These machines are like grandfathers. In the heat they fall asleep. *Oof.*'

He would also ask her opinion on all manner of things, like whether it would hurt 'a great deal' if he waxed his chest. Eventually, though, his comments would turn to Fatima, the Iranian beauty he had fallen for in college. He still spoke of her with wonder, and seemed compelled to go over the times he had spent with her.

'Once she came to see me on my break at work,' he recounted one night. 'The job was what we called grooming, which is brushing away cement. It was seven floors up. We worked without safety chains. I was the lowest of the workers, earning 600 yen an

hour and plucking chunks of cement from my nostrils every day. My skin was dust, my voice was hoarse. On a fifteen-minute break, I met Fatima in a park. I've never seen you like this, she said, her eyes brimming with sorrow. Oh Ana, if you could have seen those big doe eyes of hers!

He shook his head. 'The jobs I worked! A summer labouring at a farm. A job in a factory crushing plastic in a furnace. My hair would change colour with the plastic in the air. The others left me their time cards and had me punch them out. Come on, they said. *Mou yamerou!* Let's go. But I would stay crushing that plastic until five pm exactly.'

Ana was shocked. She knew Arjun had worked through college; she had done the same. Yet she never would have guessed at the conditions he described. On campus he had always been clean and crisply dressed. He was the student their lecturer for Asia Pacific Trade, the jovial Professor Gupta, would single out to ask, 'And how is your great life?'

But this, Arjun explained, was why he took such pleasure, coming home each night, in hearing his black Bellini shoes strike the lobby's marble tiles. He was pleased that his couch was upholstered in fine-grained leather and that his curtains were resistant to sunlight and heat. He was buying his parents a new house in India (it had four spacious bedrooms and brass door handles throughout). He would also wire them another ten thousand US dollars, which was a sort of apology for not going home for Diwali, the main holiday of the year. He couldn't leave just now, he said, with how things were at work. Still, he toyed with the idea of going to the States. It was a dream of his to work there and start a sushi chain. Then again, he said to Ana, what if Fatima tried to call him, as perhaps she would one day?

Most of his calls, though, were from colleagues or his mother. ‘But Manu – she calls me Manu – how is your health, she asks.’ Sitting back against white leather, he swigged his wine and grimaced. ‘I’m tired of answering this question.’

*

In Tokyo that July, a series of typhoons threatened. Ana had never acclimatised to summers in Japan; in Tallinn, where she was from, there was nothing like this humidity. It made cowlicks in her hair, it made her top stick to her back, and worst of all it made her feel stupid and sluggish. It was hard to reach anyone among her old group of friends, most of whom now worked in ‘office flower’ jobs – menial roles that meant long hours and low-level harassment. She whiled away the hours at the nearby Segafredo, and listened idly to the talk of diplomats and bankers. After a long, lacklustre decade, Tokyo was booming again, they said. It was a sign of the times that the hospital up the road was building a new unit for cocaine overdoses. ‘But it’s only another kind of bankruptcy in disguise,’ she heard an American declare. ‘Pouring money into Tokyo while the rest of the country is stagnating...’

A waiter was tipping a pail of water on the footpath to cool the air. One table over, a man read Nanami Shiono’s *Stories of the Romans*. The sky was a soft, close grey; there never seemed to be a sun. Checking her phone – it was near six – she saw a text from Shigeiko: *I hope you are not ungary*. Did she mean hungry or angry? Angry, probably. Ana didn’t answer, but just then the phone rang.

‘So you’ll be okay?’ said Arjun. ‘With the eel guy, I mean?’

‘Takuya? He’s fine.’

She was still seeing a few clients, Takuya among them. Generous as Arjun was, she had to make some money. And Takuya, who made his living advising restaurants, liked to dine in the company of European women. That night he was taking her to eat *hamo*, a type of eel you could only get during the summer months.

Takuya was one of Shigeko's circle, like many of Ana's clients. The first such introduction had come soon after she moved in. Ana had answered Shigeko's notice on a board: 'Single Japanese woman seeks English-speaking flatmate.' It was a comfortable, large apartment not far from the college campus, and Shigeko did not ask for a lot of rent, although she did require key money of eighty thousand yen, up front. She was in her early thirties, with a pale oval face, prominent teeth and demure clothes. When Ana moved in, Shigeko made her feel welcome by inviting her along to drinks and dinners out.

The first of these dinners was with a policeman named Akimoto. He was kind and unassuming, though Ana wasn't sure why he would take them both to dinner. If he was dating Shigeko, why would he want Ana there? Perhaps it was just kindness to a student on a budget. Anyway, she ate the meal and swapped pleasantries. Afterward, Shigeko gave her a slim white envelope containing twenty thousand yen. A gift from Akimoto – 'for textbooks', she said. Ana tried to refuse the money, but Shigeko pressed it on her, smiling and saying, 'Take it, it's a gift, what's wrong with keeping it?'

Now, just after six, Ana sat at the café, toying with her iced coffee straw. Takuya showed up not long after, wearing a blue basketball vest. His greeting came out oddly – 'Thank you for your cooperation' – but that was just his English. He always spoke to her in English, never in Japanese. As they walked toward Roppongi, he talked about business. 'The Japanese food industry is very difficult now,' he said. 'I have to persuade foreign investors to look at Japanese businesses. Profitability is down. You have to work hard to make money.'

Takuya's steps were long and loping; Ana hurried to keep up. They passed the deep green glades of Arisugawa Park, the private hospital and expensive apartments where heady-smelling jasmine flowed from iron-lace balconies. When they reached Roppongi Hills, a newish entertainment quarter, there was at least a tepid breeze waving the pond-grass in the courtyard. Early for their restaurant booking, they rode the elevator up to the viewing deck. Ana knew she was supposed to marvel at the view, to act like she hadn't lived in Tokyo for years. But when they stepped out of the lift, she was genuinely staggered. The city stretched out in the dusk, a pastel metropolis. Dragonfly-like helicopters were sweeping the pink haze and the roads were arteries of neon, pulsing and converging. As Takuya led her to the glass, she was filled with a sharp dismay. This was a vertigo not of height – a huge and lateral whirling. How completely the city effaced the earth, she thought. Then she recalled the earthquakes that were a constant in Japan, which showed that the ground beneath the lights retained a violent will. She thought of Priya Vajpayee, whose company had been hit – a big tremor had taken out their semi-conductor factory – and felt a perverse relief at the land's defiance.

At the restaurant she ate the eel, which was suitably exquisite. All the while Takuya spoke in his stilted English, saying of the wasabi, 'Please do have some horseradish.' At one point he declared, 'I'm proud of Japanese food. But not of Japanese guy. Japanese guy is shy and ambiguous.' Ana nodded politely; she was back on autopilot. Still, she felt somehow offended by the vest he wore; a few sizes too big, it gaped under his arms. Thankfully he released her when they finished eating; he got involved in talking business with the proprietor. Outside, she looked for taxis. Then without warning someone grabbed her. A bouncer for the club next door, he gripped her shoulder and, as if playing a game, a game where you guessed the origins of passing women, shouted, 'You! Ukrainian!' and let out a harsh laugh. Wrenching free, she hailed a cab. It slid to a halt, wonderfully black.

Its driver wore white gloves. God, she thought as they pulled away. She had seen the bouncer's face, his grin as hard as his grip had been.

*

The next night, she phoned her parents while taking a walk. Her father, who picked up, asked about the weather, then said in his gravelly voice, 'That's one thing I don't miss, Tokyo summers. And your mother's asthma.'

He had retired three years ago from his import-export job. Working for a company that dealt in commercial ovens and catering equipment, he had been posted to Tokyo when Ana was in high school. He settled their family in a poky house in Chiba. Ana and her two brothers soon made new friends and thrived, but their mother felt out of place and socially isolated. At the end of the three-year posting, the family had moved back home, while Ana stayed on for college.

'Hold on. Your mother is saying something. She asks if you have a boyfriend.'

'She always asks if I have a boyfriend.'

'She worries you'll settle down and stay in Tokyo. She worries Estonia will be reconquered by Russians.'

'And you, are you worried?'

'I am a fatalist, Ana. You'll do as you will.'

When she got off the call, she found she had reached the park. The air was velvety and soft and she stopped to sit on a bench. She thought of boyfriends she'd had. Real boyfriends, not clients. She thought of Daisuke, too, though he hadn't been her boyfriend, only a friend. He knew what it was like to live in another country. He had done a high school exchange to Adelaide, Australia, and endured racist jibes from neighbourhood

boys. Yet this experience hadn't soured him on the West. As an adult, he preferred coffee to green tea, and he read philosophers like Montesquieu and Bentham.

Daisuke – where was he now? Probably still in Tokyo, working for some company. In college he'd been impressed by *Made In Japan*, a book by Akio Morita, the founder of Sony Corporation. An account of Japan's rise in the post-war period, it made him want to work to better his country. He also decided, as he told Ana, that it would probably be best if he married a Japanese woman because of all the strictures of Japanese society. 'It would be too difficult for her,' he said, referring to a hypothetical non-Japanese wife. 'It's even difficult for us Japanese.'

Some time after that, she had stopped seeing Daisuke. Not because of his marriage plans, but because she didn't want him to know she was hostessing. It was a part of her life that she kept separate from college – a world of nice restaurants and bars, of Shigeko and her friends, of drinking parties that went on until the men were shiny-faced and had trouble sitting upright. At college she had boyfriends who were students like her. She slept with some of them, but the sex was awkward, experimental, like she was mimicking a desire she did not really feel.

Once she'd thought she was pregnant. She had gone to a clinic. She knew there were tests you bought in a box, the sticks you were meant to pee on, but she wanted to be sure, she wanted to see a doctor. At the clinic she was directed to undress in a room and then sit in a chair with moulded stirrups for her legs. Their purpose became apparent when the assistant pressed a button and the chair tipped back and lifted her legs apart. A paper curtain was positioned to screen everything past her navel, so she was unable to see the doctor who approached. He put his gloved hands on her stomach, pressing here and there, then poked two fingers in her vagina and felt about inside her. Afterward, when she had dressed, the assistant gave her to understand that she wasn't pregnant. She rode the bus

home not knowing what to think or feel, but later the same day her period started, as if triggered by relief.

Now, in the park, Ana walked on a little. She was not afraid. She liked the dark. She liked the textures of the trees, the way the warm air seemed to swim. Deeper in the gardens, the small lake wobbled with dim reflections, and in the trees she heard cicadas. She thought back to the time she had gone to a summer festival with Daisuke and then, on returning, lain watching TV and drinking a bottle of white wine. She remembered the night clearly: a golf tournament was on, Tiger Woods was playing and from the trees behind the house came the bleating of cicadas. She knew nothing about golf but was content to lie there watching. Then Daisuke, a little drunk, had said something unexpected. ‘You’re so free,’ he told her, turning from the screen.

‘No I’m not,’ she said.

‘It’s because you’re talented.’

The remark perplexed her. She did not feel talented. She did not know what he meant, but he didn’t elaborate. And nothing happened between them, though she would have liked it to. Nothing happened that night or ever. She regretted this, now that she thought about it. To think that after that exchange they had just lain there side by side, drinking wine and saying nothing, watching golfers hit golf balls on a golf course somewhere.

*

‘Do you like men?’ Priya asked as they drove to the mountain spa. She swivelled to look at Ana, who was sitting in the back. Priya’s likeable colleague Ken was driving

them in his car. By ‘men’ Priya meant noodles, but her tone was deliberately teasing. ‘I love them,’ she went on. ‘Especially cool *men*, in the summer.’

Priya flirted from long habit, even though she was now engaged. When they got to the spa and went through to the women’s section, leaving Ken to go the men’s, Priya’s voice lost its sparkle, becoming flatter, merely pleasant. As they soaked in the outside pool she spoke about Sanjeev, her fiancé. They had fallen in love while travelling in Europe – which was the storyline, as she said, of many Indian films. But then he had gone to Princeton and she had come to Tokyo. They had gradually grown distant, and she had dated Japanese men. After graduation and several failed relationships, she had gone home to ask her parents to start looking for a match. Deeply bemused, they had reasoned with her: ‘Dear Priya, how do you expect us to find anyone better than Sanjeev?’

‘I admitted they were right,’ she told Ana with a laugh, basking in the glow of her fiancé’s success.

Afterwards they found Ken reading a newspaper on a bench. He wore the hotel’s plastic slippers and his hair, with the styling wax washed out, had gone silky and flat. They had to dash to the Nissan because of the pouring rain. They drove back through the wet, stopping off once at a service area for Ken to buy a can of coffee from a dispensing machine. Nearby, a stumbling drunk was startled to see Ana. ‘*Ara!*’ he said, staring. ‘*Ningyo ka na to omotta*. I thought it was a doll!’

‘You know what he said?’ Ken asked.

‘Yeah,’ Ana said and they both laughed sheepishly. When Ken dropped her back at Arjun’s, she kissed each of his clean bright cheeks, causing him to blush.

Early the next morning, Ana met Takuya again. They walked through the fish market on their way to a sushi bar for breakfast, and Takuya pointed out the best specimens on offer. Ana walked quickly, especially past the shellfish, which were so

mauve, so vagina-like, that they might give Takuya ideas. But he was busy explaining a new rule in the market, that visitors had to keep a certain distance from the fish. 'There was an incident,' he said, wearing a disappointed look. 'There were some foreigners. They tried to hug the tuna.'

At the tiny sushi diner, the chef put the sashimi portions directly onto the bar, which he wiped with a cloth between one round and the next. They ate several types of fish and some hacked-off squid, which was so recently alive that the pieces were still moving, puckering in protest on their beds of rice.

'By the way,' said Takuya as they left. He walked with a basketballer's gait, his feet splayed oddly wide as if to corner Ana. 'Miura-san sent a message,' he said, meaning Shigeko, whose surname was Miura. 'She mentions her regards. Actually, she is feeling sad that you do not see her.'

Clearly he knew about their disagreement. Shigeko had been annoyed when Ana had refused a client, and won the argument by kicking her out. Ana could still picture Shigeko's face that evening, her smile fixed and brittle, her eyes strangely bright.

'It makes it difficult for her,' Takuya went on. 'Because, as you know, the role of a hostess is to bring happiness to people.'

'Is it,' she said flatly, annoyed by the lecture.

He smiled indulgently, spread his hands and said, 'You should meet her. It's not too late. You can say sorry.'

'I'm not sorry.'

Taken aback, Takuya fell silent.

'Thanks for breakfast,' she said, then left him to his day. It was still early in the morning and she walked aimlessly at first, at length finding herself on Omotesando Dori, a fancy shopping street. She was looking in the Prada window when Arjun telephoned.

‘How was your date with eel-hands? Or is it eel-dick? Whatever it is you call him.’

Ana laughed. ‘Okay.’

‘Are you going out tonight?’

‘No. Unless you want me to be out.’

‘Are you sure, Ana? You’re not bringing some boy home?’

‘No.’ She snorted. ‘I’ll see you at the apartment.’

*

That night and the coming nights, a typhoon swerved in close, dousing Tokyo with heavy rain. They went out anyway, defying the weather. One night Arjun invited Nitin, a friend of his, to dinner. Nitin was not from college and Ana had never met him, which made her suspect Arjun of trying to set her up. If this was the idea, it didn’t work out. Having organised the evening, Arjun quickly became annoyed, starting with Nitin’s choice of a budget Italian restaurant. ‘Really, this is the place you pick?’ It looked basic but okay, with plastic tablecloths.

Nitin rolled his eyes at Ana. He was delicately built and had a fine aquiline nose. He worked in capital markets, where (so Arjun said) the guys took home the biggest pay-packets in town. This was why it rankled Arjun that he ate so cheaply. Nitin, for his part, enjoyed needling Arjun. ‘Arjun, why don’t you try the house bolognese?’ he said. ‘Oh, you don’t eat beef? Oh, and why would that be, Arjun?’

‘Because, you know why. My family – ’

‘I don’t know why.’

‘Because I still adhere to some precepts.’

‘You do?’ Nitin faked surprise. He was like a cat with a stuffed toy, wanting to tease and tear. ‘Which precepts are those again? When we go out clubbing?’

Ana waded in. ‘Everyone draws a line for himself – or herself.’

‘How true, Ana.’ He grinned, and she feared what he might say next, but he merely asked a waiter to take their dinner order. Two bolognese, one parmigiana and, yes, the garlic bread to start. Then he resumed the conversation, saying, ‘How very true, Ana. I draw my own line. It moves as I do.’

Arjun’s mood was foul throughout dinner. Later, when they had parted from Nitin and were walking home, he said he would take her out again to make up for the night. They would go somewhere fancy, a converted brewery on the harbour, a place he really loved.

True to his word, he made a booking there next evening and met her beforehand at the closest station. She spotted him striding across the tiles in the high cavernous hall. ‘I love the space of it,’ he said, waving a hand at the height above. ‘Space for thinking big. I come here a lot.’ He had also been reading a lot, he added as they walked to the restaurant. He rattled off authors – Richard Branson, Bill Clinton. ‘A little Shakespeare too. I’ve been educating myself. I have the luxury of leisure.’

They reached the brewery and were seated at a table spread with a white cloth and laid with gleaming silver. Soberly, Arjun asked if she had noticed a change in him. It was true he looked different, as though his face was smoother, the set of his jaw more confident, but she couldn’t put her finger on what exactly the change had been. ‘I had my tooth fixed, see,’ he said, baring his teeth at her. ‘I can now afford to care about such shallow things.’

Behind them, on the harbour, the rain was coming down heavily. It was the night when the typhoon was almost upon them, and it was there at the restaurant table that

Arjun told Ana what really happened with Fatima. ‘Her parents sent her to meet a man, a family friend in Tokyo. He was old, she came back and told them. Old and short. But they chatted online, all smiles. All flattery, you know? I had to go away for a while; I was working out of town. When I got back she called me. She was married, she announced. To the older guy, just like that.’

The lights of the harbour struggled bravely through the weather. Arjun told his story – how he had returned to India, hiring four computing experts to teach him one on one. Rising early and working out, then taking his first classes. Eating the lunch his worried mother prepared for him. Stopping for a nap and then studying again. For three months he had worked like this.

‘Ana, do you know, my parents told me once that they’d rather I marry an Indian. But they said I was free to choose. I could bring home a Japanese girl, a Chinese girl, any girl as my wife. They said they would still be happy. They said, we will all be friends.’

‘Ana, Fatima called me once. She was drunk. She slurred her speech. It was three months into the marriage. She said, he is sleeping with prostitutes. He thinks he can do what he wants. I’ve caught him countless times but he doesn’t care. I’ve made a mistake, she said. I’m getting a divorce. I’ll call you tomorrow. Yet the next day no call came. I called her parents, they hung up. I talked to her brother, I said I could fly to see them. No, he told me. Don’t. He said she never considered me. He said his family was broad-minded, they would have considered a foreigner if she had talked to them, if that was what she’d wanted.’

Holding his fork like a small trident in his fist, Arjun stared unseeingly at the rain-smearred lights.

‘Forget her,’ Ana said.

‘But there were times – I know she felt it. And if she could feel it then, she could feel it always. I could – I told myself – I could inculcate that love. After I saw that, I thought, okay, I’ll wait.’

Then he described when he had last seen her, or rather the last two times, both soon after she married. After carefully composing her final college dissertation, he had met her away from prying eyes on a windswept Yokohama beach, handing over the finished essay in electronic and hard copies. He had seen her at graduation; she was there in a silver dress. On her arm was a man she introduced to people as her cousin. All the cameras, Arjun said, sought her in that crowd, searching for her beauty, her white moon of a face.

*

The typhoon had been predicted to hit Tokyo that night. But, as often happened, it swooped away at the final hour, thanks to a quirk of topography that favoured the capital. Next morning when Ana woke, it was to the clearest day she had ever seen in the city. The air was dry and hot, drawing everyone outdoors. The park was full of pregnant women, children and their maids. This was also the day when Ana’s visa came by mail, in an official envelope she tore at hastily. There it was in black and white, her permission to work. She promptly celebrated by doing something she never did: sightseeing. Taking the train to Asakusa, she visited the temple and neighbourhood laneways where old people moved with tiny, precise steps. She ended the tour with an iced tea in a snack bar. She drank it looking onto the storefront opposite, at a spinning mannequin that, ‘Sale’ sign notwithstanding, cocked its knee and posed with new-season confidence.

That night she and Arjun fried gyoza in a pan. They ate the dumplings on the couch while talking of old times. ‘Do you remember, Ana, when that friend of yours came to

visit? You had her in my room. I came home to find her in my bed, this plump girl snuggled in the duvet, her big boob coming out a little. She woke up and said sorry. I said, no, no, don't worry, I'm about to get in with you.'

Arjun laughed. 'I did not say that. I was very well behaved, very polite. In those days I was bright and young, not eating meat or drinking.' Recklessly he added, 'Now I'm a tiger.'

Switching the TV on, they watched some CNN footage of floods in Romania, which prompted Arjun to mention a Romanian girl he'd met. She was working at the strip club he had visited that time. 'She was exhausted, you know? I keep thinking about her. I feel so sad for her.'

It suddenly struck Ana that he was talking about her. It was for her he felt sad, equating her with the tired stripper. 'Arjun,' she told him firmly, muting the TV. 'I was a hostess.' On the screen, torrential rivers wrecked bridges and embankments. 'Are you listening to me? I was a hostess, not a stripper, not a prostitute. It isn't the same thing, which is what I told Shigeko.'

'I know, I know. I'm an ass.' He grinned, hugely relieved. Then his phone rang and he boomed, 'Priya-san, hello. And how is your great life? Oh, *ex-cellent* news.'

Priya had emailed photos of the ring and her fiancé. Viewing the files on his laptop afterwards, Arjun said, 'They're nice pictures. Actually, they look idiotic, smiling away like that. He seems so amazed. You know she said no to him for so long. Then he made it in the States. He has a green card, has the package.' He frowned and prodded the last dumpling. 'Do you think it makes a difference, the material things, I mean?'

She now grasped his dilemma, which was that he needed both a 'yes' and a 'no' answer. Pining for Fatima, he wished his wealth would bring her back, while at the same

time his idealistic self – the youth in overalls Ana had known in college – hoped it would not work, hoped love could not be bought.

‘Sometimes,’ she conceded. ‘But I think more often not.’

He went out on the balcony and looked up at the sky. His phone rang with a work call. ‘Kiran,’ he said in answer. And, coming in, he opened his laptop and started speaking Hindi. A server had gone down; connecting remotely, he tried to bring it back up. It was by then almost midnight but he called all of his team. In an aside, he told Ana, ‘If I’m not sleeping or having sex, neither will they.’

Leaving him to it, she stretched out on her futon. As he went on working she heard the odd word: ‘Server! Ping! *Nankaimo. Tiga, tiga, okay.*’ In between work calls, she heard him speaking to his parents. Yes, he told his mother, I’ll book to come back for Diwali. Then it was back to his strange muddle of Hindi, English and Japanese. Ana went to sleep thinking of plans for the next day. She would go back to the shops on Omotesando Dori with her hair in a chignon and ask for a sales job. She would use her best Japanese, especially the honorific form that was used by shop girls as it was by hostesses. She would go store to store until someone said yes.

‘*Nankaimo, nankaimo,*’ Arjun was saying. She drifted off, comforted as if by a bedside story, one of servers like grandfathers in a subtropical summer. She did not know what time it was when he fixed the problem; it was as if he would be there always, tapping at his laptop. Then it was morning and he had gone to work already, and she rose to fold the futon neatly away.

3. Uncle Koji

The ferry was cheaper than a flight. June didn't have to book. She found her way to the terminal on a cold night in Osaka, bought a one-way ticket for eight thousand yen in cash, and stretched out to sleep through the passage in a large communal room. In the morning, the lights came on to get everyone moving, industrial-strength lights to rouse the sleeping women. Everyone was getting ready, gathering their things.

There was the dull churning of the engines. She pulled on her cowboy boots and rucksack, then queued to use the toilets. Her ponytail was messy and she had not washed in two days. The best she could do was splash cold water in her face.

'Wait,' somebody said as she was leaving the bathroom. 'Wait, excuse me!'

She didn't think of stopping; she hardly registered the words. No one knew her on the boat. No one needed to talk to her. She was already moving on past the gaming machines when an old woman caught her up and grabbed her by the wrist. A tiny wrinkled creature, she had a surprising strength. Speaking in rapid-fire dialect, she said, 'Wait, you forgot this.' She shook something in June's face, a small cross on a fine chain.

'No, no.' June shook her head, backing away. She came up with the right word. '*Chigaimasu*. You're mistaken.' She moved off and carried on, crossing the beer-stained carpet, passing the chirping bright pachinko machines where several players were still captive. She bought a vending-machine coffee and stirred two sticks of sugar in, then pushed through a door to meet the wind on the front deck.

This was freedom, she thought, feeling a fierce defiant joy. So what if it was winter, if the sea was grey and rough? The ferry had powered through the night on its rolling southbound passage, and now they had entered a wide bay and the swell had levelled out.

The weather had cleared and she saw her destination, a small city with palm trees and a curving promenade. At its back was a mountain range with snow-dusted peaks, and in front, in the middle distance, stood some blockish mid-rise buildings. It was an *onsen*, or hot spring, town, and here and there steam rose like little drifts of smoke, making it look as if small fires were burning out of sight.

When they docked June got off the ferry and strode past the waiting cars. Hands jammed into her pockets, she headed to the highway, where the traffic (rush hour, she thought) streamed south toward Oita. The walk downtown took her a quarter of an hour. Here were the dated trappings of a pleasure destination: souvenirs, hotels, a triple-storey pachinko parlour. She had thought Kyushu would be warm, but it was bleak and rather shabby. The sky was a dirty pigeon grey and even the hills looked cold, their flanks desolate and bare where they showed above the treeline.

The place ought to be familiar – ought to be but wasn't. She passed a cocktail bar; that was something. A buzzing neon sign gave its name as the Cool Banana, but what grabbed her attention was the blackboard inside, where various drinks were chalked up in English. She was drawn to the tropical tiki decor, which promised warmth and fruit cocktails, and the sight of the music posters that plastered the side wall.

She'd come back when it was open, she decided, moving on. She scanned the side streets on her way and tried not to look lost. She gravitated to the train station and the Mr Donuts counter, where she bought two steaming donuts and devoured them. When she looked back the way she had come, she realised she knew the street; she knew exactly where she was. Brushing sugar from her mouth, she backtracked half a block. She turned at an antiques store to cut through an arcade. Here jazz tinkled on the tiles. This was it. She picked up her pace. On coming out of the arcade, she was in the old part of town, and here she found her grandmother's house, a large two-storey place.

Knock on the door. No answer. Knock loudly again. Something wasn't right; she knew it. A pane by the door was broken; inside she saw the unswept shards. Nothing for it. She looked around. She wasn't going to stand on the street for the neighbours to see her, so she bound her hand in her jacket and broke another pane, higher up. Gingerly, she reached in and unlocked the door.

'Hello?' Again there was no answer. She noted the shoes in a neat row, waiting for a wearer. She went on up the stairs to the main part of the house and there, padding about, started opening doors. The bedrooms were bare and so was the TV room. The sitting and dining rooms were shuttered and dark and crowded with heavy Manchurian furniture.

No one was home. No one had been there in a while. Something else had, though. The couch gave off a foul smell, a feral animal (a cat?) having soiled the cushions. Recoiling, she shut the doors to the room, containing the stench. Then she made a search of the house, scavenging in the cupboards. A discovery in the kitchen: a box of rice cakes, the kind you cooked in the microwave. After warming one on a plate, she chewed on the rubbery result. In a pouch in the bedroom drawer, banknotes. A thin fold, not a lot, but enough to buy groceries. Next she took out a photo album, paging through it as if for clues, but all it held were photos of her late grandfather's war – a tour of the Pacific, island beaches in blazing sun, crisply-uniformed young sailors standing in a row.

Where was her grandmother, and why did the house feel so abandoned? Downstairs, she explored the shuttered lower floor. More dark furniture stored away. A bike with a broken chain. The bath in a separate room, a big stone tub in the floor. When she tried the tap there was no water, just a short sharp blast of steam. Thwarted, she went upstairs and stripped off by the kitchen sink, standing to clean herself with a soapy cloth. Afterwards, in the TV room, she made her best find yet: the coffee table doubled as a *kotatsu*, meaning it had a little heater built in underneath, and she sat at it shivering, warming up by degrees.

Only then did she notice the shrine across the room. There her late grandfather's stern-faced photograph was now accompanied by one of his wife, who looked out with a hooded gaze, and this was how June knew her grandmother had died.

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In the almost-empty bar, a young woman was wiping tables. She could have been about June's age and wore a black turtleneck and skirt. When she looked up, though, June saw her unusual features. Stupendously wide eyes made bigger with eyeliner. Prominent cheekbones. And her height – she was very tall, as June saw when she straightened up. She spoke in Japanese, saying, 'Sorry, we don't open until five.'

June was on the hunt for work. She had come back here, to the cocktail bar, imagining warmth and English speakers. Sure enough, it was brightly lit, with lamps and coloured lanterns, and she could picture it filling up, people ordering mojitos. She began in her stilted Japanese before lapsing into English. 'Is there a manager I could speak to?'

'Sure. The owner's here. I'll get him.' The waitress looked puzzled but went to find her boss, and soon a man stepped out from behind a curtain. Fortyish and floppy-haired, with tobacco-yellowed fingers, he looked sceptically at June. He fired questions at her in a guttural Japanese. What was her name, her age, her bartending experience? The waitress looked on as June did her best to answer.

'Aren't you Japanese?' he demanded to know.

'Yes,' she said stubbornly.

He laughed a sharp barking laugh. '*Usō*. You can't be. What are you, American?'

'No.'

‘Well, have it your way. There’s no job for you here.’ Throwing a dishcloth over his shoulder, he walked away, muttering, ‘She must be soft in the head or something.’

This was a humiliation. Did he have to be cruel? She hated him for being what she’d been warned about, a callous unbeliever, the sort of person she could expect outside the protection she had known. She had not believed the warnings, had heard the thinness of the words. She would not believe them now, despite the man’s attitude. Feeling flushed, she left the bar. The waitress tailed her out. ‘You really don’t speak Japanese?’ she asked her on the street. June shrugged, getting defensive. There was no way to explain; it was the way she had been raised. They only ever spoke English in their tight-knit community, the collection of houses and small landholdings on the outskirts of Osaka.

‘If you want my advice, you don’t want to work here.’ The waitress looked over her shoulder and crossed her arms against the cold. ‘Give me your number. I’ll ask around for you.’

‘I can’t. I don’t have a phone.’

The waitress blinked, then said, ‘Okay.’ She took the order pad from her pocket and wrote her own number under her name, Chiharu. ‘Excuse me, I have to go.’

Chiharu’s kindness went some way toward making up for the bar owner, and June went away feeling guardedly optimistic. Still, she had failed to get a job, and on returning to the house felt a new wave of desperation that threatened to overwhelm her. She pulled off her boots in the dim entryway, having adopted the habit of mostly leaving the lights off, as it was better if people did not know she was there. Now she noticed a sharp new smell, an artificial pine-forest scent. Then she heard a sound. At first she thought it was the cat, the stray intruder that had made a mess on the couch. Then she heard footfalls, human ones, and knew someone was inside. Casting about in the entryway, she grabbed

the only thing she could find, the greasy old bike chain that she'd left there to toss out. Ascending the stairs with a soft tread, she saw a lamp on in the sitting room.

She almost didn't see the man crouched in the hallway. He was facing the other way, bending over something. As he straightened up, June acted, moving swiftly without thinking. In a stride she was behind him and bringing the chain over his head. With a yank she dragged him backwards, and she was surprised that she could do this, surprised that he gave way, letting his knees splay out in front. He twisted and struggled, trying first to grab her hands, then to grasp the chain that was cutting at his throat. All her conditioning rushed back; this was danger, come to find her.

'*Nan darou*, what's this!' He was an old man, but still strong. As he wrenched the chain, it broke. He rose to his feet and staggered. Now it was she who was falling forward, landing on her knees. Standing over her, the intruder flicked the light switch on. She saw a wrinkled skeletal figure in a dirty undershirt and jeans, with black grease on his throat from the bicycle chain. How old could he be? she wondered. He could be deranged, unstable.

'Junko.' He stared and laughed, an incongruous response. His laugh turned into a wheeze. He raised a hand – to strike her, she thought, flinching – but instead he merely tapped two fingers at her cheek. 'So it is,' he said. 'You're Junko.' He spoke in Japanese and used the Japanese form of her name. 'I recognise you, heh-heh.' She stared back at him, shocked. How did he know who she was?

He banged his hand on his chest. 'Koji,' he said. Swivelling abruptly, he turned to the album on the hall table. He jabbed with apparent meaning at a black-and-white photograph, which showed two children with bowl-cut haircuts standing on a street. The boy was the smaller of the pair, scrawny but cocky. The girl, who was taller, wore a dress with a sweetheart neckline.

‘Now I’m old Koji.’ He grinned. ‘But it’s a pity, you’re too late.’ He stroked the print wistfully. ‘Sister has gone. She passed away in April.’

So that was who he was, or claimed to be. Her grandmother’s little brother, which made him her great-uncle. She surveyed him with suspicion, still unwilling to trust him. He wasn’t a vagrant, but even so he could bring trouble. He was family, which meant he could reveal that she was there.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked him.

His answer was no answer; it was like he was talking to himself. ‘What are you doing here, she asks! Young people have no manners. But that’s the way of it, isn’t it. That’s how it goes.’

He gave her a wily look, narrowing his eyes. He should have been irate (she had just attacked him, after all) but he simply picked up the bike chain that was lying on the floor and, putting it down on a news sheet, wiped his greasy hands on a rag. This was when she noticed his box of cleaning products. She also saw, in the other room, that the couch cushions were propped up, airing. The windows were open to the night, the wood surfaces had been oiled, and a bottle of disinfectant sat on the carved chest. The old man had been cleaning; that was what she had caught him doing.

Now she noticed something else. A vinyl bowling bag on the floor, a clean shirt draped across it. These were his clothes, his things. This meant he planned to stay. She wasn’t expecting this and wasn’t pleased about it. His cagey look told her he was thinking the same thing. ‘Still, it’s Junko. Imagine!’ He shook his head, amazed. And suddenly she guessed he had no right to be there either. Was he as worried as she was about being flushed out?

Alright, old man, she thought. She kept him in her sights, stooping for a rag with which to clean her hands.

*

During the days that followed, the man made himself at home. He established a routine that was designed to make a point, getting up early in the morning to start his passive-aggressive cleaning and stripping down to a pair of shorts to vacuum or scrub. He darted back and forth, making violent thrusts at cobwebs. He was ancient but tireless, an energetic bag of bones, with his ribs showing clearly under his leathery skin. His manner let June know that she was to blame for the dirt and dust. He scrubbed the sofa repeatedly and was angry about the cat. He blamed her for that too, as if she had willingly let it in.

As uneasy cohabitants, they staked out separate domains. Koji slept in the TV room, which had the *kotatsu* for keeping warm. He claimed the room by hanging his shirt and trousers from a hook. June chose not to relinquish the bedroom she had taken. The larger bedroom, her grandmother's, they left conspicuously empty. He did not call her by her name, only addressing her as 'you', and she returned the compliment by not calling him anything. Actually, she didn't know what she was meant to call him. What *were* you supposed to call such a strange and ancient person?

By day, she looked for work, going out in the cold weather. She gave the department store a miss, passing the doors that let out huffs of perfumed air. She tried Mr Donuts and the shops around the station. She tried the antique store, where the dealer was polite. A fastidious man in middle age, he gave her a few minutes, regarding her like a curious if unsaleable piece. Overcoming her reluctance, she called the waitress, Chiharu, using a payphone at the station. She didn't expect much, but Chiharu said she'd heard of

something. She couldn't talk long – she was at the university, about to go into a lecture – but she took June's address and said she would drop by.

By night, in the house, June heard the old man eating. He appeared to subsist on azuki-meshi, rice boiled with red beans. It was cheap, she supposed. And easy to chew. He ate his meals at the heated table and cackled at the television. One night it was *Law and Order*, dubbed over in Japanese; the next it was *The Stinger*, a reality program. It featured Japanese women who conspired to test their boyfriends' fidelity by setting up elaborate sting operations. Koji loved the show and kept up a running commentary, addressing the hapless men and trying to warn them off. 'Look out!' he would say. 'Don't fall for it, idiot!'

Living together was annoying, but this wasn't what bothered June. She worried about the risks that came with his presence. It wasn't only that he might rat her out to her family; she was afraid that he might die, just from being so thin and old, and then his death would become her problem. She would have to report it and deal with officialdom. This risk that he might perish of extreme skinniness motivated her to cook dinner for him one night, a simple meal consisting of pasta and green salad. This exercise did not win her any points with Koji. He complained about the chilli in the arrabiata sauce. He was angered by the lettuce she put in the green salad, and she saw that he had trouble with the bowl-like iceberg leaves, which with their coating of dressing slipped between his chopsticks. He petulantly told her he that disliked Western food, and the experience made her sorry she had tried in the first place.

After dinner that evening, Chiharu came around. It was her night off from the bar and she dropped off some food for June, a bagful of vegetables and some small sweet pastries. June was struck by her thoughtfulness. They were near-strangers to each other and yet here was Chiharu, bringing gifts. Bringing up jobs, she said, 'Do you know the

Hit Parade, the nightclub? Satoshi's friend Danny plays a regular gig there and he says they're looking for someone to clear glasses.'

'Alright, I'll check it out,' June said hopefully.

Chiharu, she learned, was studying to be a teacher. She explained her unusual looks by saying she was a *halfu*, with a Peruvian mother and a Japanese father. She was fluent in Japanese, Spanish and English. 'And you,' she prompted June, 'you've lived in America?'

June's first thought was to mention California. Here she thought of Father David, the founder of the church, because she recalled that he had started out in Huntington Beach. 'Hawaii,' she said instead, picturing palm trees and white beaches.

'*Sugoi ne*,' Chiharu sighed. 'I'd love to go.' She looked around the kitchen. 'So this is your family's house?'

'My grandmother owned it until she passed it away. My great-uncle is staying. I don't think he likes me much.' June put the vegetables in the fridge. Eggplants and radishes, cucumbers and cabbages. She tried to thank Chiharu, who told her, 'Don't mention it.' The vegetables had been pressed on her by her local grocery store, she said. The people there insisted on giving her extra things for free. Because of the way she looked, they could not believe she was Japanese. In fact, her parents lived in Yufuin and ran a successful tree-trimming business, but to the grocers she was foreign and therefore probably very poor. 'It doesn't matter that I keep saying I'm Japanese! Lately I've given up. They just want to be kind.'

Throughout their conversation, Koji had been sitting at the table, drinking beer out of a can and frowning at their use of English. Chiharu greeted him politely, which seemed to appease him. He looked more interested again when the pastries were brought out, and

happiness lit his face when he was offered one. But after they joined him at the table, he started to lecture them, co-opting Chiharu as his translator.

‘He’s talking about the war, the time after the war. He’s saying, “We had no food. I had to walk across Kyushu, looking for work, for food.”’

Chiharu listened and nodded. Her face was appropriately grave. Encouraged by the audience, Koji warmed to his theme. June was listening, trying to get something of what he said. His tone was edged with hostility and he kept shooting her blameful looks. Talking didn’t calm him down; it only seemed to make him madder. He crammed the last pastry in his mouth and kept talking about the war, and about the West and America, as though he looked on her as a de facto American.

‘Now he is talking about prisoners of war. He says Japan’s prisoners complained about mistreatment, about being given – how to say it – inedible roots to eat? But he says that the Japanese were eating roots as well. He says, “To us this is food, they didn’t understand, just because in America they eat McDonald’s every day.”’ The tirade continued, traversing a range of historic wrongs. They let him talk and talk, because what could they say? Chiharu knew the right way to listen, assuming an expression of perfect docility.

Afterward, in the kitchen, June asked in a low voice, ‘Do you think he’s alright? I mean, how old do you think he is?’

‘He’s fine,’ said Chiharu, pulling on her coat. ‘Look at him. My aunt, she’s a nurse, she works in Fukuoka. She says people that age are indestructible. They didn’t die in the war. They managed to survive. It’s like nothing can kill them now. They keep hanging on.’

Once she had seen Chiharu off, June went back inside. She found her great-uncle had retired for the night, closing the sliding doors to the TV room. He had left his

cellphone on the table by the plate of pastry crumbs. Seeing it, she picked it up, casting a glance at the closed doors. Then she shut herself in the toilet and surreptitiously dialled home. Hearing it ring, she almost hung up, but then her sister answered. 'Hey, it's me,' June told her, keeping her voice down.

'Where are you?' her sister hissed. Naomi was sixteen and a half, two years younger than June. She had a babyish quality and acted even younger. She read books about horses and girls who solved mysteries. She idolised River Phoenix, putting his pictures on her walls. She lay looking up at him from the rug between the beds in their shared room, careless of making June tread awkwardly around her.

'June, they are flipping out. How could you do this?'

'Naomi, listen –'

She wouldn't listen. She butted in angrily to say, 'I don't want you to try to call me. I won't cover for you. I won't!' Before hanging up, she added, 'If you call again, I'll tell them. I'll tell them where you are.'

With that she hung up on June, who stood there feeling shaken. Had Naomi guessed where she was staying? It was possible she had. It wouldn't be hard to figure out, or not for Naomi anyway. It would take their parents longer to realise where she was. They wouldn't think she knew how to get to her grandmother's – how to take the ferry, how to find the house. The last time they'd come here she was seven or eight years old. Would Naomi do it, give her away, betray her to their parents and the leaders of their church? She sounded angry enough to do it, June thought that night in bed.

She had left the cellphone on the table where she found it, hoping the old man would have no idea she'd used it. In the morning, she found him eating his breakfast as normal, but the phone was no longer on the table and he didn't say good morning. Then June saw what he was eating. Lettuce for breakfast. This from the man who objected to her Italian

salad! He had piled the leaves on a plate with toast and a fried egg. He was staring at her gamely, daring her to object, and taking bites of a lettuce leaf and a piece of toast by turns.

Later that day, she went to the Hit Parade. It was several streets away, and she walked there in the cold. Walking through the door, she surveyed the nightclub, which in the light of day put all of its shabbiness on show. Disappointingly, it was nothing like the Cool Banana. It had Fifties-style décor (red walls, red padded booths). Framed photographs of musicians and albums lined the walls – Elvis, Buddy Holly, Johnny Cash – but the radio by the bar played saccharine girl-group pop, the kind of thing that Naomi would listen to at home. Fronting up to the studded bar, June asked about the job. A broad-faced bartender looked at her and nodded. ‘Ah, so you’re Junko. Good. I’ll put you on and we’ll see.’

So she came back at five that evening to wipe tables and clear glasses. The club had an older crowd, most of them regulars. They came to the Hit Parade to hear the music they liked best, sometimes performed live by ageing tribute groups. A few patrons got rowdy as the night wore on, cheering and swaying to their favourite songs and mock-waltzing with each other on the parquet dance floor. June moved among them deftly, saying, ‘Look out, coming through!’

It wasn’t glamorous or well-paid, but she found the time passed quickly. Ito, the bartender, asked her to come back the next night. Soon she was working at the club five nights a week, knocking off at midnight after she kicked the stragglers out.

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During these first weeks, June hid her pay from Koji, secreting the money in the drawer full of hosiery. Her great-uncle stayed long enough to see to things around the

house, sorting through the downstairs rooms and carting boxes of junk away. Some days he went out on errands that were mysterious to June. She didn't know where he lived, if he had any fixed address. He was evasive on the topic, always grinning and sidestepping. Once, when his wallet was lying open, she snuck a look at his driver's licence. She couldn't read the characters indicating his address, but she knew they did not say Oita prefecture. Another time, she saw him with what might have been his mail, although it was equally possible that it was Grandmother's mail. She figured he was handling his late sister's affairs; someone had to be doing it, paying the bills at least, because months after her death the power and water were still on.

Since she couldn't bathe in the kitchen as long as he was there, June was forced to go to the bathhouse two doors down. The first time she went, entering the women's section, the old neighbourhood women knew exactly who she was. She had been a topic of discussion, she realised belatedly. One ancient woman tried to help her wash her back. When June recoiled with a frown, another old bather intervened. She taught her the word *osekkai*, or intrusive. It has the desired effect because her helper backed off, and June could sit on her stool and wash unimpeded.

She also learned, through gossip, why her own bath did not work. One of her neighbours across the alley, an unscrupulous bath-lover, had dug down to steal the spring for his own use, diverting the water to his basement room. June didn't really care; the bathhouse was cheap enough and close. She came to enjoy going there of an evening, soaking in the hot water. She could never properly heat her grandmother's draughty house, and as long as Koji stayed he hogged the *kotatsu*, so that getting warm meant retreating to her room with a pile of blankets and lying under them, mummy-like, with all of her clothes on.

After two and a half weeks, however, the old man moved on. He left while she was out, taking his bowling bag. There was no forwarding address. He simply disappeared. She suspected he'd gone by train; she didn't think he owned a car and the idea of him driving was alarming to think about.

Left alone, June found pleasure in living by herself. She had Chiharu come over or they went out with their friends, a motley circle of students and musicians. They tended to drink at the Cool Banana or at the tiny one-counter bar that Satoshi, Chiharu's boyfriend, opened some nights. Satoshi was older than Chiharu, in his mid-thirties. A reedy-voiced singer, he sometimes did solo shows and at other times played sets with a boisterous ska band, traveling to Oita and further afield.

There were also a few foreigners around, and June might as well have been foreign for all the Japanese she knew. There was a Canadian guy named Terence, an ESL teacher, who took it upon himself to teach her a few expressions. 'Knowledge is never wasted,' he insisted to her one night. 'It's really a shame your parents didn't teach you, but now that you're living in Japan you're out of excuses.' He started with his favourite, the expression *tachi-shoben*, 'which basically refers to some old dude pissing in public.'

'Got it,' said June. 'That is good to know.'

There was Danny, a Singaporean musician, who had passed on word about the job at the Hit Parade. He performed there on Thursday nights doing an Elvis act. He was also well known at the Cool Banana, apparently having once gone on national TV as a guest on the show *Koko ga Hen da yo Nihonjin*, or 'Here Are These Weird Japanese People.' It was a panel discussion show for foreigners in the country, and Danny had gone on in his signature black leather jacket and argued loudly with everyone in his choppy Japanese. For his standing gig at the Hit Parade, every second Thursday night, he wore a spangled jumpsuit and jumped about onstage. Whenever he saw June, he sang a few bars of *Hey*,

Jude, but swapping 'June' for 'Jude'. This was probably her least favourite Beatles song, and she cut in to say, 'Danny, skip it.'

They often went to the Cool Banana, although initially June resisted, not wanting to run into the owner again. When she did go, he didn't seem to remember her and mixed her mojito with a dramatic flourish. This suited her fine, and so she began to feel at home. When they went to Satoshi's bar, it was even more like a private party. Once, heading out to buy more mixers, Satoshi asked her to mind the bar, and it gave her a warm glow to be trusted with the job.

One day in July, June came clean to Chiharu. The moment came when the conversation turned for some reason to Hawaii, with Chiharu asking her what it was like and why she had left to come to Kyushu. June had to admit she had never been there, not even to visit. 'I've never been anywhere,' she said. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you, it's just difficult to explain.' Then she went on to tell her friend about The Family. She described the way she had been raised in their small community, living close to Osaka and yet remaining apart. Being constantly watched by other members of their church. Being pulled up if they did anything wrong, facing a reproach from the vigilant pastor.

'But what about your parents?' Chiharu asked, taken aback.

'It was the same for them. Still is.'

'Couldn't you leave?'

'I did the shopping with my mom,' June said with a shrug. 'We would go out once a week to buy what we couldn't make or grow. Milk, bread, chocolates, shampoo, shaving razors.'

Her mother was trusted to do this; she was the firm believer. Pale and passionate, she was full of admonitions. Not just for her daughters but for anyone who transgressed. With her unwavering sense of purpose, she had always sought out causes and had got to

know June's dad through the peace movement in Kyoto. They were rebelling against their families, against militarism. As a young couple, they had been active in anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, then came into the orbit of some pacifist Christians. June's parents took naturally to evangelism, as well as the counter-cultural spirit of a fringe existence.

'Far out,' Chiharu said. 'Are there others like you, people our age?'

'Yes.'

'How many?'

June thought of Naomi but didn't mention her to Chiharu. 'Not many,' she said. 'It's mostly single people and some young families.'

Having told the truth, she was relieved when nothing changed. She went on as before as one of their little group. Sometimes they all drank too much and roamed the streets before going home, or else sobered up by eating at the pancake cart. They told jokes and did stupid things to entertain each other. One morning, she woke up beside an ugly pachinko poster, having ripped it from a wall in a run-by the night before. It was hard to get rid of it without her neighbours seeing it, since the trash and recycling bags were all made out of clear plastic. She had to tear it up and dispose of it gradually, bit by bit.

She had almost forgotten Koji when he showed up again. He arrived on a Monday night while she was out. She came home to find him at the dining table, eating her peanut butter out of the jar with a spoon. Looking up, he smiled and said, '*Ojamashimasu.*' The traditional greeting of a visitor, this meant, 'I am getting in your way,' or 'I am here to disturb you.'

A few nights later, though, it was he who was disturbed. Battling a cold, June had taken a night off work. She lay in bed reading and hearing the old man's shuffling movements. Having finished his dinner, he went into the TV room and clapped his hands

twice at the small household altar. Then he turned on the television and channel-surfed for a while before switching it off at last, leaving the house quiet. June fell asleep at some point but was woken to shouting. It was the small hours of the morning and someone was in the alley, shouting loud enough to wake the whole neighbourhood up.

‘June, June!’ called a man’s voice.

Terrified, she froze, thinking someone had come to find her, someone from the church who had found out where she was. It took her some moments to grasp that the voice was Danny’s. He was down in the alley, drunk. It was Thursday and he had finished his set at the Hit Parade. ‘June! June! Are you home?’ He launched into *Hey, Jude*. She was painfully aware that everyone would be listening; everyone in the neighbourhood would have woken up by now. This can’t be happening, she thought, and she acted as if it wasn’t, as if the obvious solution was to lie there in denial. After several moments, though, someone answered Danny. In the next room, Uncle Koji had opened a window. He raised his voice to shout in English, calling out, ‘No, thank you!’ His words rang in the night and had immediate effect. Danny fell quiet and stumbled on. The laneway was silent. June continued to lie there, cringing, mortified to her core.

In the morning, she emerged from her bedroom, pulling her robe about her. She passed Koji in the hall. Neither of them spoke; he just turned on his old stare, giving her daggers. Once again, she was to blame, this time for a breach of propriety and, unforgivably, an interruption to his sleep. Whatever the purpose of his stay, he decided to cut it short and left the house mid-morning with his bowling bag and jacket.

That wasn’t the end of it. There were still the women at the *onsen*, who she had to face that evening when she went to bathe. The expressions they gave her ranged from displeasure to wistfulness, because all of them imagined her to be involved with Danny, romantically entangled with a troubadour Elvis.

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Summer came with an eggy smell, from the sulphur in the springs. Tourists descended, walking the back lanes and buying cobs of corn that had been cooked over the steam. Having gotten a new chain for her grandmother's bike, June could now ride everywhere, full of breezy exhilaration. With Chiharu on summer break, they did random things for fun, like touring the city's sex museum, a local attraction. They posed by a nine-foot phallus carved from a cypress log, then a diorama of two zebras mating. They tagged along to places for Satoshi's gigs, one day driving in the van all the way to Fukuoka. The band played at a nightclub there that was full of American servicemen, and for some reason all the girls wore blue contact lenses that made their eyes glow freakishly in the UV disco lights.

Another day that summer, they drove to a festival in the hills. It wasn't a planned thing; Chiharu called June to say, 'Be ready in ten.' They took winding mountain roads and June had no idea where they were. At one point they passed a convoy of military vehicles carrying Self-Defence Force cadets in camouflage gear to a remote spot for training exercises. At length, a sign over the road declared that they were entering 'Jamaica Village.' They parked by a sports oval with stalls and a stage. It didn't seem to June like this should be real, but people were wandering around with rasta hats and dreadlocks, and dancing to a line-up of reggae and ska bands. This was nothing like the performances she heard at the Hit Parade, and nothing at all like the music she knew from home, the singing of songs in church backed by the digital piano.

The humidity was oppressive; the heat had been building. When at last the weather broke and it started raining, the band continued playing and the dancers kept dancing.

Water was streaming off peoples' faces and the brass instruments. June was dancing too, moving with the others, swept up in the downpour and a shared cathartic joy. She had never felt so joyous, so exhilarated. Afterwards, as they drove back, she thought of the church again. She used to play the drums; that was her contribution. She had enjoyed the music, or sometimes anyway. It was the thing that made her think the whole thing wasn't bogus. Then at some point she had stopped liking the music; it had stopped moving her to joy, stopped sounding like anything other than a bunch of voices.

She thought of Naomi often, more and more as the days went on. She worried that her departure had made things harder for her. She thought of home again on another day that summer, when they drove over to Yufuin to visit Chiharu's parents. Yufuin was as tasteful as their city was kitsch, and Chiharu's parents lived in a manicured residence. Soon after they got there, there was another ring of the doorbell, which was a courier with a gift from a customer – some live river fish in water in a polystyrene box. Chiharu's dad promptly prepared the fish for them to eat. He and his wife were kind. Knowing June was by herself, they told her, you're always welcome, please come here anytime. Yet afterward, driving back, she fell into a funk.

'Is something wrong?' Chiharu asked.

'No. Your parents are nice.' In truth, though, June was angry. She didn't mean to be, but she was. She had been treated to a glimpse of what a family could be and the experience had left her full of a sense of waste.

Of course, she said none of this to Chiharu. They went out that night as normal. They had a drink at Satoshi's bar and then went to get a snack, walking to the pancake cart. When they got there, however, the cart wasn't there. 'The guy must be taking the night off,' Chiharu said as they turned back. Just then, an old man standing nearby looked up guiltily. Believing himself to be alone, he had just taken a leak, and June saw him

finishing and zipping up his trousers. ‘Sorry, sorry,’ he said, bowing and walking unsteadily away.

‘What was that about?’ asked Chiharu. ‘What was he sorry for?’

Nothing is wasted, thought June. ‘*Tachi-shoben*,’ she said.

‘Oh.’ Chiharu nodded, she understood, and this brought a moment of satisfaction. She had been able to come up with the right word at the right time. Still, there was something on her mind, a drag on her enjoyment. The thought came to her very clearly: she had to try again with Naomi.

The following day, before her shift, she made a call. She picked the time carefully to reach Naomi alone. Even so, it did not go well. How could it, after all? When her sister did pick up, when she realised who was calling, she fell silent for a time as if unable to speak. Then she asked June in a tone of sisterly resentment, ‘Can’t you just come back?’ At least, she started with resentment, but her voice changed halfway through the question, so that it ended up coming out as a desperate plea.

‘I can’t. You know I can’t.’

And so her sister hung up again, ending the brief exchange. The conversation stayed with June for a while after that, sitting heavily on her heart whenever she thought of it.

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Toward the end of the summer, there was unexpected news. June took a call on the train back from Oita, a trip she now made once a week for an English tutoring job.

This was an extra source of income. She tutored a couple in their home. They were middle-aged and childless and worked as music teachers. They shared a special love of

music made with bells, and they liked to keep up their English skills for the trips they took to Europe, where they visited churches and went to recitals.

‘June, I’m pregnant,’ said Chiharu.

‘What?’ June couldn’t believe it.

‘I’m going to have it.’

June floundered. ‘What will you do? Where will you live? What does Satoshi think?’

‘He’s happy. I am too, now I’ve thought about it.’

‘What about your studies?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t told my parents yet.’ She said she and Satoshi might move to Yufuin. She added that she wouldn’t have her job for much longer anyway.

‘You think they’ll fire you, you mean?’

‘I know they will, but it isn’t only that. Didn’t you hear? The bar is up for sale.’

‘The Cool Banana? Why?’

‘The owner’s moving to Hawaii.’

That afternoon, June went home and knelt to count her savings. It wasn’t enough, she thought bitterly. It would never be enough. To make things worse, Uncle Koji came back that night. She was inclined to feel downcast, but his mood was oddly buoyant. Perhaps it was the warmer weather or the fact that her Japanese was better, but the next morning, over coffee, he told her there was something he wished to do, the two of them together, before the season got too late. He was going to gather clams and he wanted her to help him. Surprised, she agreed. It was a nice idea.

The next day was her day off work and they set out in the early morning. They headed for a beach to the north of the ferry port and stood by the shallows to look for dimples or bubbles. They used a sort of metal pump to suck up promising tubes of sand,

like scientists extracting core samples from ice or rock. They fossicked through to find the littleneck clams, each of which was only the size of a small coin, and dropped them into the bags they had brought for the purpose. They were not the only ones doing this; there were whole families at work. June had a faint memory of doing this as a child, but she didn't remember it being such hard work, all the bending and standing up, the squatting and straightening. At Koji's insistence, they stayed at the beach all day, gathering clams long after her arms started to tire, long past her appreciation of the beach's muted colours.

Koji kept at it like his life depended on it. How could he need so many clams? June had no idea. She didn't know how to cook a clam. How long did they keep? After an unreasonably long day, they took their bags and hailed a taxi. The driver gave them dirty looks when he saw their dripping sand-covered bags, but Koji told him, 'Don't worry! Do you think we won't be careful?' As he said this, he knocked some sand over the seat and floor. The driver looked like he wanted to eject them, but he was too intimidated by Koji's extreme age.

June was exhausted. She just wanted to go home. But on the way Koji had them stop at an apartment building. 'Whose place is this?' she asked. He chuckled and wouldn't say. After pushing the buzzer, they went up to a small flat where they were met by an old woman. Koji gave her a bag of clams, which made her beam at him, all smiles. June, who was wondering if this was Koji's girlfriend, looked around the room for signs of whether she lived alone but could find nothing conclusive in the collection of bric-a-brac. The woman made them stay so she could fix them noodles with the clams, in a Japanese version of spaghetti vongole. Over dinner, she gave Koji a tall can of beer to drink, and then another just as big when he finished the first. She did not sit down to eat but hovered to wait on them, smiling coquettishly whenever Koji said anything. June had given up

trying to figure out the deal between them. Right now she was so tired she could fall asleep at the table. How the old man was still awake she had frankly no idea. To top it off, he made them walk home after the meal, pointing out that they were close and no cab would want the fare.

At last they were home. It was now well after dark. On entering, Koji shoved the bags of clams at June. With beer on his breath he said, 'Do something with these, girl.'

'Do what?' she protested.

He took the bags back in a huff to deal with them himself. 'Don't you know anything?' he demanded, and now his old anger returned. 'What did your parents teach you? Nothing.' He banged around through his tirade. 'Have you told them you are here? No. You have no respect. Just like your father. Where was he when his mother died? Not here, I can tell you that. Poor Mrs Kuriyama rang the police. She was the one who noticed when Sister stopped going to bathe.'

He was really angry now. This time, she understood. It was anger mixed with grief and a wish to attribute blame. Dumping the clams out in the sink, he rounded on June. 'No respect, no duty,' he repeated. 'And what about your sister? Where is she while you're having fun, larking about with your so-called friends?'

June responded with anger too. 'I'll go back for her.'

'And do what? You can't bring her here. Your parents won't let you. You know this house has gone to your father. Sister left it to him. Beats me why! Hah-hah. The way he ran off with your mother, that terrible fox-faced woman.' He peered at her through the dimness. 'You're no different,' he said, then all but spat the accusation, '*Kitsune*.' Fox.

'You're just a crazy old man! What would you know?'

'I know,' he said, 'I know. Don't worry about that.'

He turned abruptly to the sink and ran the tap over the clams. He'd leave in the morning, of this she had no doubt. He'd disappear like before, going who knew where. For all she knew, he spent his days roaming over Kyushu, going from place to place as if the war had never ended. Yet there was something in his manner, a touch of sheepishness, she thought, and perhaps he already regretted what he'd said. He couldn't take anything back; he didn't have it in him. Instead, he turned his back on June and muttered under his breath. 'Anyway, that's how it is, I'll do it myself. Don't worry, old Koji will do it by himself.'

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Winter. It was cold again. Chiharu's belly grew. Her sculpted features thickened and she went off certain foods. When she walked, she leaned backwards to balance out the weight.

June lived alone in the draughty house. She had started playing music with a group of people, friends of Satoshi's who had some drums they let her use. At home by herself, she hogged the *kotatsu*, the TV. She hadn't heard from Koji and didn't bank on him showing up. The next time he came, she didn't know if she'd be here, still living in the house that neither of them owned.

The men came at the appointed time and she let them in downstairs. The antiques dealer was there too, watching their every move. He had been through each room already, examining everything and giving little verdicts. 'Very good.' (The ornate chest.) 'A representative piece.' (The bureau.) 'Superb condition for its age.' (The dining setting.) 'Siamese rosewood, extraordinary.' (The finely-worked folding screen.) At the end, he

had made a list of items and figures. She took this and read it, nodded and said, ‘Well, then.’

Now the men carried the things from the laneway to the street. They loaded them in a truck, swaddling everything with blankets. The dealer gave her an envelope full of ten-thousand yen bills. They completed the transaction in view of the family altar, under the watchful gaze of her grandmother’s photo, but June felt no regret as she thanked the dealer. She watched the truck drive away then set off on her bicycle. She had the money in her satchel, having counted it carefully. She had in mind a hopeful vision, of starting something for Naomi, a livelihood for the day she wanted out of The Family.

June rode through the city as snow started to fall. The snow had to be soft and light because it somehow never landed; hitting the warm air from the springs, it swirled up again instead, rising instead of falling. It looked beautiful and absurd and caught at her heart. She had never seen anything like it, but she rode on to the seafront highway until she reached her destination.

Here was the Cool Banana with its dormant neon sign. Here was the owner, drawing a blind at the window. She braked to a halt, not stopping to lock the bike, but pushing the door open to enter the bar.

4. A Land of Hope and Glory

‘A twenty-four degree summer’s day,’ the pilot said as they descended. It was dawn, and the drifts of cloud flushed pink like new rose petals. Incredibly, wildflowers were pushing up beside the runway. They looked so cheerfully at home in the pall of jet exhaust that Sam was put in mind of what people always said, how *green* it was in England. The other thing people said was that it had history, by which they usually meant ruins, blue plaques and tourist spots. But here was T5, which was the opposite, brand new. Built before the crunch, it was a steel and glass colossus. He’d read of it at the time, in a book extract in *The Age*. The author, who was a sort of pop philosopher, had waxed lyrical about the building – how its surface footprint was the biggest of any building in Britain, how it had so and so many miles of conveyor belts, how it was truly a monument to our modern age, our answer to the original great colossus, the statue of Helios atop a pedestal at Rhodes.

Stepping into the aisle, Sam zipped his leather jacket to trap his body odour. Holding the travel wallet that Ursula had given him, he walked up a jet bridge plastered with ads for Citibank. Inside the terminal, he joined the long line for non-EU arrivals. This snaked between barriers; the travellers moved like sheep through pens. Long-haul passengers, like him, the unwashed denizens of former colonies. He heard African inflections, lilting Caribbean voices and two New Yorkers talking of in-flight omelettes. An hour on, he reached the counter and a young-looking official whose mottled pinkish skin suggested a shaving irritation. The guy took Sam’s passport, checked the screen before him and then glanced up to ask, ‘Were you recently denied a UK work visa, sir?’

‘That’s right. In February.’ The man looked doubtful so he added, ‘But I haven’t come to work. I’m visiting my brother.’

‘You’ll need an interview.’

Sam blinked. He felt like playing pedant and telling the man, ‘I think you mean to say *you* need to interview *me*.’ Or even, ‘How is this different to an interview?’ Keeping quiet instead, he followed the guy to a side door. It bore no sign to say what it was and opened onto a corridor that was just as nondescript. ‘How long will this take?’

The guy shrugged, becoming guarded. ‘Till the start of business, when somebody clocks on who can do your interview.’ He showed Sam to a small room with no external windows, just the square porthole in the door. Asked to sit, Sam did, then set out his documents as if for a client meeting – itinerary, boarding stub, printed map of Oxford. Next to these, the travel wallet, which was made of fine-grained leather. This was typical of Ursula, who had exacting standards. It was only remarkable that she hadn’t left him sooner, that she had kept on believing in his law-school self, the winner of course prizes, the favoured recipient of multiple plum job offers.

The official sat opposite with a form, ticking boxes down the side. He ticked one box beside the words, ‘I am detaining you’, then another to indicate he was holding Sam’s passport. Sam looked on in disbelief. It seemed ridiculous. He now wished he had not refused the brackish in-flight sludge that had been offered to him as coffee. And he wished that he had slept – but he could never sleep on planes. In transit he’d snatched a nap in Singapore airport, lying down in the covered slide of the jungle gym. He had been woken by a toddler colliding with his head, a moment that had caused confusion for them both and profound mortification for the kid’s Japanese dad.

‘Sign here, please,’ said the official. His gaze flicked to the travel wallet and he tacked on a ‘Sir’. He asked for Sam’s mobile phone. ‘I’d better call my brother first.’

‘Your case officer will do that.’ After waiting pointedly for Sam’s signature, he took the form and left, pulling the door shut with a click.

Sam straightened his papers and checked his watch. It was half past seven. He had no books or magazines to read and pass the time; he’d spent the flight watching films and playing a tank combat game. Now, with the pen the man had left, he wrote the time of his detention on the back of his boarding stub. Beneath that he made two marks, one for each six-minute unit he had spent in the room. At work he’d disliked time recording – carving up his days, dismembering them, he felt – but now he held to the habit as to a line of a defence. Suppressing indignation, he sat and waited and, each six minutes, made a new tally mark. At last someone came in, a woman this time. She wore the same uniform of navy sweater and white shirt and had her brown hair in a bun.

‘Mr Khan,’ she said brightly. She set about putting questions, such as why had he applied for a work visa, and why was he now entering the country as a tourist? Sam answered her frankly; he was too tired to be embarrassed. He spoke of how he’d been desperate to get out of his job and how, in the new year, he’d thought of leaving Melbourne. He’d applied to work in the UK as well as for jobs in Sydney. Rejections trickled back, including for the visa. The ground for refusal was his failure to prove his bank balance; his printed-out electronic statement, a photocopy, was not acceptable as proof. He might have reapplied, but in the meantime things had changed. His firm had offered a round of voluntary redundancies and Sam had accepted one. The payout meant he could take time out before he had to start job-hunting. He could visit his brother, who was doing a doctorate at Oxford.

‘It does look suspicious, though,’ said the woman. ‘As if you intend to work covertly.’

‘Covertly?’ He laughed weakly. ‘That’s not how lawyers get hired.’

‘You could get a different job.’

‘Pulling pints behind a bar for what, six pounds an hour?’

‘Plenty do. You don’t want a job?’

‘I just need time to think.’ Sam almost laughed again. He had uttered the same words to his dad two weeks before. That was at the dinner table in his parents’ house. South Asian migrants’ sons were not supposed to give up their jobs, and his dad had alternately shouted and looked mortally wounded, before slouching off to watch the late news by himself.

The woman now outlined what she called ‘next steps’ – first, she would call Taj to confirm what Mr Khan had said, then she would make a recommendation to her superior. When she had gone, he tallied units and shifted uncomfortably on the chair. The seams of his jeans chafed and he was sweating in his jacket. He should have worn a blazer, something preppy and middle class. Fatigue settled like a mantle; his chin jerked as he fought sleep.

Hours passed. Then one o’clock brought movement. A stocky man entered with a tray. Hoping for release, Sam was handed a wrapped sandwich.

‘What’s this?’

‘Egg and lettuce.’

‘No, I mean, what’s it for?’

‘For? It’s to eat.’ The man’s accent was regional, from somewhere deep in the northern Dales. Sam, unable to pick the shire, suddenly felt foreign. He had imagined he knew England; he had read its old cases and knew the history of Westminster. He had seen photos of his parents during their stint as Londoners: his dad in Cuban boots, his mum in flowing palazzo pants. His Gujarat-born grandmother knew the words to Empire songs like ‘Rule Britannia’ and ‘Land of Hope and Glory’. Having been freed by

widowhood to be politically incorrect, she liked to sit in her front room and play Elgar recordings.

‘You’ve been here five and a half hours, which means you get a meal.’

‘I know how long it’s been!’ He thrust ten pounds at the man. ‘I don’t want a free lunch.’

The northerner looked affronted. ‘I can’t take that from yer.’

‘Give it to your manager. I’m not here for a handout.’

The guy took the tenner, a petty victory. As the man went out again, Sam got a glimpse of the room across from his. An African woman and her kids lay on the carpet in a tangle of limbs and clothes spread like blankets. Chastened, he sat up straight. He would not lie down or nod off. To make sure of it, he peeled the wrapping from his sandwich and, taking minuscule bites, chewed it into oblivion. Meanwhile, he wondered at the holdup. Had Taj not answered his phone? He could throttle his little brother. He had been waiting for nine hours. This became ten hours, then eleven. It was almost the close of business. Would they keep him here overnight? His tally lines darkened, scoring the paper stub, almost going through to the table.

At ten minutes to six, a different man entered. ‘Mr Khan, will you please sign here?’ He smiled and smoothed his comb-over. Sam read the sheet twice then signed. ‘We’ve had instructions, you understand.’ The man handed Sam’s passport back and opened the door. ‘With unemployment as it is, we can’t have everyone pouring in. We were about to deport you when we reached your brother.’

So Taj had finally emerged from the library or wherever. He had spoken with the assurance that belonged to a Rhodes scholar and made the bureaucrats believe what Sam had said all day – that he hadn’t come to Blighty to pull beers in a pub, that he would hardly look for work amidst the layoffs in London, and that in fact he did not have to, not

with the payout from his firm, which was enough to keep him going until he found something new

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Disgorged into the twilight, Sam found the coach he wanted. As they left one motorway for another, an old man in a flat cap turned around to him and, pointing at a field where dozens of birds were taking flight in a great rippling wave, said, ‘Would you look a’ the birds on tha’?’ Sam, feeling empty, gave a noncommittal nod. When his phone rang – it was Taj – he let it go through to voicemail. Soon a message buzzed. *Hey, are you alright? Cannot believe they made you wait. Out-fucking-rageous.*

Sam tapped a reply. *See you in an hour.* Shutting his eyes, he slept till the Thornhill Park-and-Ride, where half the passengers got off. As the bus entered the city centre, Sam stared at the old stone buildings, which, with their gargoyles and castellations and massive oak doors, looked like they’d been built to keep outsiders out. He disembarked at the last stop, a uniquely drab bus station, and from there trudged to his brother’s with the aid of his printed map. When he knocked, the door opened and there was his brother, dishevelled and unshaven but handsome all the same, making it look as though haircuts were meant for lesser beings. Taj hugged him and laughed. ‘Shit, you reek!’ he said.

It was a relief to go inside, to let Taj show him around. ‘That’s Carly’s room, she’s cool, coxes for St Catz. This is David’s, he’s hardly here, he’s screwing a girl who lives in Cowley. This is me. Don’t mind the mess. How is Ursula?’

‘She’s fine.’

‘Here’s your towel, man. Catch.’

In the privacy of the bathroom, Sam showered for an age. Lathering the soap, he felt his chafed groin sting. When he turned off the flow, he heard Taj say through the door, ‘I knew it had be a mistake. I mean, it’s *you*, for fuck’s sake. Where were they even thinking, bailing up a lawyer?’

‘An unemployed lawyer.’ Sam inspected his reddened balls.

‘That’s your problem there. Always so defeatist.’

Fuck. What did Taj think, that you could shout your way out like in an American TV drama? Threaten to sue them all if they didn’t turn you loose, argue a God-given right to an entry visa? People were bailed up at airports all over, not just in Britain but in the States, and at home too for that matter. Try telling that to Taj, who was so sanguine in his views, so annoyingly assured, he’d never be persuaded.

The next day, Sam tried sightseeing. His brother had heaped him with suggestions: ‘There’s the Ashmolean and the Bod. You could gatecrash some lectures. Technically you’re meant to be a uni member, but turn up in a tweed jacket and no one’s going to stop you.’

‘A tweed jacket?’

‘There’s a look. You should see my students. Nineteen year olds who *iron*. Crazy, I know.’ He brought up a lecture list on his screen. ‘See, there’s some on classics, you could brush up on your old major. Or take my bike out for a spin. People say there are Roman ruins in the countryside, fallen-down villas and stuff, just sitting in the fields.’

Actually, Sam knew very little about the Romans, just the broad brush-strokes they gave you in first year. He had studied the Greeks, writing a thesis on Thucydides, Book Two of the *History*. But the difference was lost on Taj, who promptly launched into a story about some play he’d seen – ‘It was Greek, I’m pretty sure’ – put on by students at

a college. It was laughably bad, he said. ‘All the wailing. And the plot! It’s just families going mental, and basically everyone is doomed.’

Taking Taj’s suggestion, he went out the next day, but his excursion to a museum failed miserably. Caught in a downpour, he had to plod back in wet jeans, a walk that inflamed his rash and caused an exquisite agony in his groin. The day after, he couldn’t walk further than the kitchen without turning back in pain. With Taj at the library and the others out of the house, he kept his own company in his brother’s untidy room. He rang Ursula’s number twice and hung up when he got voicemail. Flicking through his passport, he was dismayed to see one page had been stamped ‘ENTRY DENIED’. Someone at immigration had crossed out the stamp in biro, adding the date and a signature, which only made it look like Sam had crossed it out himself. Fucking hell, he thought. This was going to cause problems. When he travelled on from England, whenever he went through immigration, he would be bailed up and asked to explain the stamp. He imagined the sceptical officials, the difficult exchanges, the same thing playing out over and over. In frustration he threw the passport, which missed his suitcase and hit the floor. Retrieving it, he smoothed the corner and put it away.

He couldn’t call Ursula again. It was past midnight in Melbourne. He wondered where he had gone wrong – except he knew, of course he knew. He remembered one evening at their flat, her coming home from work after some case or other and saying, ‘Oh well, it’s only money.’ She’d had a bad day, had been dumped on by a jerk of a senior associate. She’d pulled off her slingback heels and stared into the fridge. He should have poured her a glass of wine and ordered in pizza, but instead he had given her a lecture. It wasn’t just money. Civil litigation is our society’s answer to the use of private armies, to the rule of thugs. That’s what commerce used to involve, before you had the rule of law. Think of, I don’t know, Genoa in the twelfth century. Think of cycles of violence between

the big trading houses. What we're doing is meant to be an alternative to that. So it isn't *only money*. He should have taken her to bed and worshipped her body as he used to do, as he'd done in the beginning.

For all that she'd said it was only money, it wasn't only money to Ursula. He found it embarrassing, how nakedly she wanted to buy into an upper-middle-class existence. For her it was programmatic; she would get it methodically, piece by piece, like building something out of Meccano. The semi-detached house in a leafy inner suburb, the car upgraded for a new one every other year, the annual holiday overseas. He reminded himself that of course she would want this. Her parents had divorced when she was young, and she had been tipped out of a lovely home into a succession of altogether less lovely ones. At bottom, however, he looked down on the bourgeoisie – a word nobody used any more, not in ordinary conversation.

He had always assumed that that life would be there if he wanted it. In truth, he had meant to go on disdaining that kind of existence, and then accidentally acquire most of its trappings. Now he saw it being pulled out from under him like a rug. These were the things that happened while you weren't watching: the future of the middle class was sold out from underneath you, and your beautiful girlfriend fell in love with someone else, the same senior associate who'd been a jerk to her at the start. The guy had really turned things around. And Ursula – she'd resisted, he gave her that. No making out at the Christmas party, no after-hours fucking in the ninth-floor sick bay. It was all on the level. We want different things, she said, broaching it like an adult. Have you been talking to my dad? he had asked her. Because you're sounding a lot like him.

*

Taj was out all that day, tutoring or at the library. Though outwardly easygoing, his brother was hardworking, a fact he hid so as to seem effortlessly bright. Privately, he recorded his work time like a lawyer. He had told Sam about his system: he worked in twenty-five minute bursts and carefully noted each increment he completed. The system had been devised by an Italian guy named Cirillo, and the twenty-five-minute unit was called a ‘pomodoro’ after the tomato-shaped kitchen timer Cirillo had used as a student. Thus Taj would refer to ‘knocking out pomodori’ – this said with a certain swagger if he’d had a productive day, although more often he felt he hadn’t done enough.

They had never been that close, although people thought they were. They were close in age and talents, but not in outlook or temperament. Once, after they’d won a debating tournament together, the emir of a gulf state had paid them and the runners-up to coach the contestants in his country’s top debating teams. Sam had had reservations, but Taj was all for it. ‘If the guy wants to pay me, I’ll take his money,’ he declared, and Sam went along rather than ruin things for his brother. Another time they had argued over the Rhodes scholarship. When Taj won it, Sam reassured him, saying it checked out, it hadn’t been funded by blood money – Rhodes money – for decades. Taj reacted with annoyance. ‘Who’s asking for your approval?’

At some point, Taj texted to say he’d be back later. While he was out, Sam drank tea and spent a while online, trawling through chat forums and listings on eBay. He also researched his rash, trying to self-diagnose. The worst patch, beneath his balls, was hard to inspect, but his research turned up a cream he was pretty sure would help. He messaged Taj to ask if he’d pick it up from Boots. *Sure thing*, came the reply, but his brother came home that night with a totally different product.

‘That’s not it.’

‘I asked the girl – ’

‘I bet.’ Sam tossed the tube in the wastebasket.

‘Hey, what’re you doing? You’re acting fucking weird. You come all this way to hang out in my room? What is it you’re even doing, spending all day online?’

‘Nothing. Just forget it.’

The next day, Sam’s rash still hurt. He looked again at his passport and the unsightly crossed-out stamp. He kept thinking about Heathrow and his day in that small room. He pictured the table, the square window, the thicket of tally marks. He also pictured the officials and felt his anger flare, an anger that he’d suppressed or maybe just deferred. But then he recalled the man who’d brought the sandwiches, and anger gave way to puzzlement. The guy was so unlike your standard export-version English, the ones who propped up bars at St Kilda in the summer and the affable expats you came across at work.

That night, to placate his brother, Sam went out for a drink. He rode to the pub on Taj’s bike; this was preferable to walking. In the quaint, back-lane pub, he found Taj sitting among friends and loudly regaling them with the story of his brush with immigration. When he joined them at the table, they turned to him with shuttered eyes, like he must have done something wrong. Trying to explain, he mentioned the bank statement issue and what he had been told about rising unemployment, but he could see the detail bored them, they had already lost interest. As they moved onto a new topic – a boisterous debate about the economist Polanyi and whether his theories predicted the current sub-prime crisis – he glowered in silence and emptied his pint. He didn’t need to hear Taj doing his *History Boys* thing, playing the contrarian just be outrageous. He downed another pint and then a whisky double, after which he decided it was time to make a move. By now Taj was in full flight – ‘Of course I’m not anti-state *as such*,’ he was insisting to the table – but he looked up as Sam left.

‘Where are you going?’ He came out after him, grabbed his arm. ‘Seriously, wait!’

‘Get off me,’ Sam said. His own vehemence surprised him. So did the force he used in shoving Taj away and wrenching himself free. As he stumbled and fell on the damp cobblestones, he saw his brother’s face go slack with shock and hurt. When he got to his feet, Taj had already gone and he was faced with a group of girls in Ugg boots and short skirts. One called in a piping voice, ‘Oh, are you alright?’ Smarting and embarrassed, he waved them off with an ‘All good’. He flagged a cab back to the house and went to make tea in the kitchen. He was startled when someone came in; he’d thought no one was home. It was the housemate from upstairs, a girl in a grey hoodie. ‘Sam, isn’t it? Your brother told me what happened, at the airport when you came.’

‘Did he,’ said Sam, displeased.

‘Yep.’ She opened the fridge. ‘You know, my step-dad in the States?’ Her rising inflection made this sound like a question. ‘He lives in Minnesota. Flies a lot for work. Like, he flies a *lot*. Interstate mainly. He’s a politics professor, goes to speak all over –’ Still unsteady, Sam tried to follow. He noticed the motto on her hoodie: *Nova et Vetera*, new and old. ‘But he has the exact same name as some guy on the no-fly list. So when he flies someplace, often he’ll be held there for hours. Kept at the airport and just made to wait. It’s happened so much now we know what it is when he doesn’t show.’

‘That’s awful.’ He studied her more closely. Carla, or was it Carly? She seemed so all-American, so wholesome and corn-fed. ‘I know, right?’ She grabbed an apple and a Sainsbury’s salad tub. ‘Then we’ll call them up, my mom will or I will. At first they’ll refuse to say that they’ve got him there. We say, we know you’ve got him. He’s not the guy on your list, which actually you know because you’ve figured it out before.’

Sam shook his head, appalled. He felt more sober now. As he poured hot water on his teabag, it occurred to him that this girl, this Carla or Carly, did not straightaway

assume he had done something wrong. All the others had. Taj's friends, even Taj. Taj had blamed him for being passive, for not arguing his way out. Or charming everyone as he might have done.

Sam felt a warm prickling in his throat. With something like gratitude, he looked at Carly/Carla. Then her eyes narrowed and she said, 'Is that my tea you're drinking?' He glanced down at the teabag, which bobbed there in plain view. It was – he couldn't hide it – the last from the box. And the girl sighed heavily, took her snack and kicked the fridge door shut.

*

He rose early to get a start, leaving without a word to Taj. The bike wheeled easily on the path, cutting through the dew. He was wearing the new jacket, which felt snug across his shoulders. He had ordered it online after much research and comparison of fabrics with names like Barleycorn and Overchecked Herringbone. Why this had come to seem so crucial he could not have said; it was usually Ursula who cared about this stuff.

He rode on out of town in the milky morning light. Cycling easily, without chafing his rash. A few times he had to stop to check his printed map, which had the coordinates he'd pulled from an online forum. He took a few dappled lanes through storybook countryside, seeing improbably fat bees, even a fleeing squirrel. Reaching a ditch beyond a rise, he dropped the bike in the long grass. He jumped the fence nervously, caught his sleeve on a barb and swore. This was trespassing and he knew it. He wasn't usually this bold. The bravest thing he had ever done was take his redundancy. What was the line from Thucydides? Of everything he'd read during his honours year, it was the one

quotation that had fixed itself in his mind: *But the bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory as well as danger, and yet go out to meet it.*

Surely he could manage this modest transgression. Jogging on to a clutch of sheds where the air had a whiff of rot, he found a bumper compost heap under an open-sided shelter. ‘Wow,’ he said aloud, kneeling to clear a patch. Beneath the putrid mess he could see a mosaic, densely patterned in reds and browns, which was all that remained of a Roman villa. He scooped at the compost with his hands, uncovering more tiles. So much for heritage protection – or was that a new-world thing? Still, the rot was kind of fitting. Roman Britannia lay in ruins; things had their day and faded. Scooping more of the compost clear, Sam thought again of Heathrow and its shimmering terminal. He thought of the question the philosopher had posed. What do we signal by such buildings, the great monuments of our age? Whatever the answer, Sam now thought, it was only temporary, much as any civilisation was only temporary.

From far off, through the swarming heat, came the sound of a dog’s bark. The farmer’s voice trailed after it, old and peevish-sounding. Glancing down at his smeared hands, Sam guessed how he appeared. Sweaty. Swarthy-looking. His mail-order tweed lying on the muck, no good to him now, and what had he been thinking? His tee-shirt reeked of sweat. It was the one he’d worn in transit and the day he’d been detained. Though it had been through the wash it still had the odour of that day, holding onto it like something not to be expunged.

That smell. It took him back, yanked him back to that small room, and he felt his nostrils curl in anger and disgust. The association was automatic, a subliminal fast track. For some time the smell of sweat would have this effect on him.

It would happen the next week when, starting his travels, he landed in Cairo. In the customs halls he would watch anxiously as the official leafed through his passport. The

guy with the visa sticker ready, peeled off and held aloft on his index finger. On seeing that crossed-out stamp he would fix Sam with a look. ‘What is this?’ he asked him. Three words. *What is this?* And Sam would suddenly somehow know what he had to do, would know to slip two banknotes in between the pages, then slide the passport back and tell the man, ‘It’s nothing.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

And the money would disappear as if it had never been, and the man would paste the sticker right over the stamp, as if it too had never been, and with this he’d wave Sam on, granting him entry.

Glory as well as danger. The words sounded in his head. Then from that green English field more immediate sounds burst in, a dog’s bark, sharp and close. Beside the compost-covered tiles, Sam heard the old man coming too, calling out to see who the intruder was. ‘Hello?’ Alarm cracked his voice, breaking the word in two. ‘Hello-o? Who’s that? Who’s there?’

Ducking under a low beam, Sam stepped out into the open. The dog was barrelling at him now, a snapping terrier in a rage. Fending it off, he called, ‘It’s me. I came to see the ruins.’

5. The Black Madonna

The first time Dan and Shelly went to look at the Black Madonna, they were put off by the queue that trailed out of the basilica, across the tiled courtyard and down the hewn-stone steps. Despite Europe's financial woes, which were all over the news, it was as if half the world had come to Spain that May.

'To hell with lining up to see a lousy statue.' Dan had light-blue, hooded eyes and a pale, oval face, and looked like someone you might see in a Vermeer painting. 'I should have guessed,' he shrugged. 'The statue had its own Wikipedia page. It's meant to bring good luck, especially to newlyweds. Or the Christian version of good luck, which is what, abundant blessings? A Holy Virgin force-field?'

'Man,' said Shelly, disappointed. She was older than Dan, thirty-one to his twenty-seven, but her unguarded manner made her seem younger.

'We'll come back. We've got time.' They had only recently settled in at the artists' colony where they were working for the summer as live-in managers. The place was not far from Montserrat; from their room, in clear weather, you could see the pinkish peak and next to it the range known as Les Agulles.

Afterwards, though, they forgot about the statue. They fell into the rhythms of the artists' colony, of running the big old *masia* that lay off the A2, just over an hour's drive out of Barcelona. They divided duties between them according to their talents. Shelly dealt with the needs of the artists in residence, doling out bug repellent, booking minivan transfers and mediating disagreements. 'Well, this is awkward,' she would say, 'so let's be awkward, let's go there.' Dan handled emails and updated the blog.

In free moments, he scanned the news and relayed highlights to Shelly, such as how some meteors were meant to shower over Spain ('Not close enough to kill us, only to look pretty'). After hours he worked on books of his iPhone photos. Pulling on a headband to keep his hair out of his eyes, he would hand-write captions like 'The amazing shadow the fan made on the bedroom ceiling', 'The cake that José made for Shelly right before we ate it', and 'View from flight back to Chicago after my grandma died.' He posted his photos on Instagram as well, and had gained a small but growing cult following.

Shelly meant to draw but was finding it difficult. She kept screwing things up and deciding to start again. Usually she favoured automatic drawing, an unplanned way of making pictures that, as she liked to say, just happened. Though she had never been to art school or any kind of college, she'd managed to make her way in Pittsburgh, showing her work there, 'rubbing elbows' and selling drawings. At the colony, however, she felt the chanciness of her method, which in the heat and the foreign setting was now failing her. She was happiest on the days when they swam in the village pool. It had been built before the bust and was a sparkling blue oasis. Floating in its waters, they could look up at Montserrat and the stone pillars of Les Agulles, which as the locals joked looked like a row of penises.

They spoke idly of hiking up to see the Black Madonna, taking the forest trail from the village to the mountain. This would make them feel like pilgrims and also double as exercise. Shelly was not a hiker, and neither was Dan, although he had lately become a lot more interested in fitness, reading up on how to make short workouts effective. He had an app on his phone that sounded a bell after thirty seconds followed by sounds of cheering and applause. He found the sound effects motivating and used them for other tasks to give himself an all-purpose congratulatory soundtrack. Shelly heard him playing

the app as he went about his day. When he was working. Making the bed. Clearing his emails.

As May went by, then June, they both forgot the Black Madonna. August brought a heatwave and the village festival. All at once they were due to leave; their replacements, another couple, were en route from Vermont. The days had disappeared, evaporating into nothing, and then Dan got an email with an unexpected offer, a junior lecturing position starting in the fall. The job was with a fine arts college, and though it was only an adjunct role, it came with a conference budget and family health cover.

‘New York,’ Shelly said, reading over his shoulder. ‘I don’t know anyone in New York.’

He swivelled to look at her. ‘It’s New York state, not Manhattan. I wouldn’t know anyone either.’

‘I don’t want to leave Pittsburgh.’

‘We left Pittsburgh to come here.’

‘I don’t want to leave again.’ Standing there with her glass of whisky, she felt suddenly afraid.

‘Can’t we think about it?’

‘Of course we’ll *think* about it.’

Outside, the artists sat at a table, drinking before the Festa Major, the concert marking the last night of the village festival. A group of nine or ten, they had a fractious air. The heat of August had ruined them, stealing off with their intentions and leaving indolence. A few had sought inspiration in the colony’s surrounds: Carlos, a muralist, had played guitar on a village bench; Delilah, a sculptor, had lost herself in the forest, sat down on the pine needles and scrawled a letter to her father. She couldn’t send it, she admitted, let alone exhibit it.

‘Everyone, everyone!’ Shelly said to buoy them. She dinged her glass with a knife. ‘I have an announcement. You might have heard it said that *canatonic* is not a word. You might have heard Dan say that, yesterday at this table, when I used it in a sentence. Well, I’m pleased to say he was wrong. It is, I have discovered, a type of cannabis.’

‘You’re sure it’s not a brand?’ said Dan.

‘How could it be a brand? How can cannabis have brands?’

‘For a moment,’ said Carlos the muralist with a smile, ‘I thought you might say something else. I thought, ah, they are engaged!’

‘No, we’re not engaged,’ said Shelly, ‘and anyway I’m married.’

This was news to the residents. Carlos coughed into his beer.

‘I was young. I got married. My ex and I separated.’

‘And she met me six months later.’

‘Fast work,’ Carlos said.

Dan’s response was mild but a rebuke all the same. ‘We like to think of it as the right amount of time.’

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It was in Pittsburgh that they’d met, the city of three rivers. Or two rivers really, as Dan said. ‘The Allagheny and the Monongahela, joining together to become the Ohio.’ A friend had introduced them at Shelly’s thirtieth, glossing the truth by telling Dan that Shelly was divorced. In reality she had separated and was seeking a divorce. Dan told their friends he enjoyed the scenario, that he got the illicit kick of seeing a married woman without having to deal with the headaches of an affair.

Dan was from Pittsburgh but was then living in Chicago. Driving back to see Shelly, he listened to audiobooks. He tore through *The Hunger Games*, which Shelly thought ridiculous, ‘especially the crazy names’. Dan didn’t argue – ‘I’m not saying they’re not crazy’ – but showed her a website, Hunger Names, where you could type in your own name and find out what you would be called as a character in the series. ‘Your name is Billee Frankledeen,’ the website declared. ‘Congratulations! You had the honour of being a District 7 in the 37th Hunger Games! You were killed by losing an argument with a monkey mutt.’

Shelly had grown up in Ohio, which was also where she got married. They had the reception at an Italian restaurant where her mother worked. They didn’t get free drinks, but a guy sang Sinatra songs with a karaoke machine. ‘It was okay,’ she told Dan. ‘It was not what I imagined. I don’t know what I imagined.’

She didn’t regret the marriage. She regretted the tattoo, a yin-and-yang symbol on her calf, matching her husband’s. But things could have been worse. She could have gotten a Tweety Bird right above her butt crack. Dan agreed she had done well to stay Tweety-free. Tattoos weren’t his thing. It was his Jewishness, he joked, and the thought that a Jewish graveyard could refuse to bury you unless the mortician cut your tattoos out.

Dan was Jewish on his mother’s side, Ruthenian on his dad’s. The Ruthenians were a people who came from Eastern Europe. Their descendants, Dan told Shelly, included Andy Warhol, who was also from Pittsburgh. The Warhol conversation became a little heated when they argued over which street the artist had lived on as a kid. Wikipedia said they were both correct – Warhol had lived at two addresses, one after the other – but Dan had insisted that ‘his’ address was the most important, Warhol having lived there longest. ‘Because clearly that house in Pittsburgh was where it all happened for him. New York, what was that? That’s where he went downhill.’

Dan's family still lived in Pittsburgh. His dad was a professor. His brother Greg was an attorney, the kind of Jesuit-schooled lawyer who boozed and womanised by night and then, each Wednesday morning, helped Pittsburgh's cash-strapped women with their divorce proceedings. Dan thought Shelly should ask Greg for help with her divorce, but she was worried he'd be a jerk and lord it over her later on.

Was she anti-divorce? Dan had asked her once. That wasn't it, said Shelly. She wasn't religious like some Italians. She wasn't even that Italian. She didn't speak the language, hadn't grown up on the food. Mostly she had been raised by her mother's mother, a woman from backwoods Pennsylvania who was married off and pregnant before she knew the facts of life. When someone finally let Nan know how her baby would come out – from her lower parts, not her belly button – she said her eyes had opened wide 'like two silver dollars'.

Shelly's brother lived in Ohio. She had changed his nappies. Tom had grown up slightly slow and she sometimes feared for him. After leaving home, she dreamt she was carrying him in a bucketful of water. He was drowning in the water but she didn't know what to do, so she just kept carrying the bucket. In real life she phoned her brother but never knew what to say. Once she'd sent him a hand-drawn card, writing inside that she often thought about him. Another year, when she was visiting him for Christmas, they had gone in his car for beer and she had seen the card folded over the driver's seat sun visor. It tore her up to see it, made her feel guilty again. The last time she'd seen Tom she had taken Dan along and he had come away saying he and Tom had a lot in common.

'You mean sport and video games?'

'Yeah, like sport and video games.'

'But that's what guys have in common when they have nothing else in common.'

Before Spain, she had worked in an art museum. She took visitors around, mainly art first-timers and kids from poorer schools. As they toured the collections she asked them leading questions and then paraphrased what they said, trying to give them a few more ways of expressing their responses. It was work she liked to do, work she was good at doing, and the museum had promised her a job on her return. Not just her old job, but that of her manager, Therese, who was quitting to care full-time for her Down syndrome kid.

Acting Manager of Visitor Engagement. Hearing the title aloud, Shelly had been filled with a vast joyous relief. She felt like her cruise ship had come in, as though it was, at last, her turn.

*

She slipped away to the studio, stealing some time as the others drank. She tried working on one drawing, then cast it aside to start again. She found her store of high-grade paper was unaccountably diminished, and couldn't be sure if she had used it all herself or if one of the residents had been taking it on the sly.

Dan put his head in to ask, 'Did you turn the fan on in our room?'

Without looking up, she told him, 'I want it to cool down for tonight.'

'You know that's not how a fan works.'

'Okay, so turn it off.' She snapped without meaning to, then felt bad about it.

'Top-up?' He extended the bottle of Cutty Sark. He bought this brand of whiskey because it was the second cheapest.

'Later.' She shook her head.

'You don't want to knock off?'

‘No. I mean, I *want* to. I’m just worried about the show. I’m meeting Raelene when I get back. She’s going to be pissed.’ She was soon to have her first solo show at an arts space in Pittsburgh. This had been planned a year ago, after she’d won a drawing prize, and back then a year had seemed long enough to make the work, a generous stretch of time, luxurious even.

‘You have drawings.’

‘Not enough. They’ll think I’ve been lying by the pool.’

He was unruffled, like always, and told her, ‘You’ll make it happen.’

Will I though? she wondered when she was alone again. What had become of the animus, the dark wellspring of her art? The animus was an idea she had gotten from her mentor, a painter named Silje Drake who was revered in the northeast. Shelly had been lined up for the mentorship with Silje as part of winning that prize. (At the time she was disappointed to learn it didn’t come with money, only exposure and connections and unbankable acclaim.) Silje (pronounced ‘Silya’) was not what she expected. Not a paint-spattered artist in a flowing smock, and not a frighteningly stylish black-clad figure either. Instead she had mousy grey-brown hair, which was cut rather bluntly, but not so bluntly as to make her look like a lesbian. She wore a woollen crew-neck sweater like you might see on a gardener. She said, ‘I don’t have a lot of time so I’ll cut to the chase. Why don’t I tell you the things I wished I knew when I started out?’

Shelly felt a frisson. This was going to be good. She expected self-help type advice but tailored to the younger artist.

‘Number one is scale.’

‘Scale?’

‘That’s what I said. Every work of art has its own innate scale. You have to listen to what it’s saying, if it’s meant to be big or small.’

‘Okay,’ Shelly said.

‘Number two is process. In art, the process is all you have. Day to day, I mean. It’s what you have, what you live with, not the critical reception. People might like what you turn out. Equally they might not. So you have to enjoy the process.’

‘Okay,’ Shelly said again.

‘So that’s two.’ Silje Drake was counting on her fingers. ‘Three is the animus. This is the dark genius, the source of the image. It lies behind creation. I’m not talking about god, I mean a different sort of force.’

‘What does it do?’

‘Do? It shows up. The rest is over to you. Animus, process, scale. That’s everything I know.’

That was it for the mentorship, one meeting in October. At the time she’d felt short-changed, even a little bitter, but the idea of the animus stuck with her afterwards. It captured something mysterious about what happened when she drew. At the same time, on some level she was afraid of the animus, which she imagined as being a dark goopy creature, a bit like something you might see in a Studio Ghibli film. It was a world away from Dan’s working philosophy, which in its Dan-like mildness was not remotely scary. He liked to quote, or perhaps misquote, something Chekhov said. ‘He had this line about how he lacks a big theory of everything, so his work is more about paying attention to people, how they speak to each other, the way they live, and so on.’ As an artist he followed a tradition that went in and out of favour, which was to use photography the way non-artists did, to take pictures of things and people in daily life.

‘Shelly,’ said Dan, looking in. ‘Do we have tweezers, do you know? Andreas has a splinter from the wooden seats outside.’ He saw her expression and went on, ‘You know what, hold that thought, I might know where to look.’

Shelly thought of art as all the things you ordinarily put away, which was lucky for her because she had so many. There was her childhood, or childhoods, broken into different phases. The early years with both her parents, who didn't know how to be parents. She always had chilblains because they put her in thin socks. They didn't understand cold weather; they dressed in a careless, hopeful manner. There were the times at her grandmother's, playing out in the yard with Tom. There were the years with her mother's boyfriend, the easygoing Jeff, who had a malformed hand due to thalidomide exposure. He seemed like a good guy but he interfered with Shelly. Her mother did not want to believe it or even hear about it, and it took longer than it should have for them to move elsewhere.

There was the time, after her marriage, when she did move far away, setting up house with her new husband on an island off Seattle. The island was called Whidbey and you got there on a ferry. It was oddly divided into two ends, north and south, the north being mostly occupied by military families and the south by hippie types and artists like them. Never the twain shall meet, the hippies always said. Yet Shelly felt a twinge when they derided the military. She had grown up with the sort of guys who went into the armed forces. She was a cat in the same sack, she couldn't help but feeling.

And Dan – what could he know of any of this? His life had been as smooth as the skin on a glass of milk. He was born into a family that used to be in steel. The business had been founded by some forebear or other who made a lot of money selling iron rails in the Civil War. The men spent Sundays boating or going to the races, but Dan's granddad, an eccentric, took against company life and dumped the family holdings. By the time Dan was born the family was comfortable, nothing more, but to Shelley they still seemed like a breed apart. They had an unruffled quality that she put down to money, or

the genetic memory of having it. They still moved through the world as if nothing could touch them.

Not long ago, she had watched a series made by Grayson Perry, an artist who had won the Turner Prize in Britain. It was all about Britain's classes as seen through their different tastes, which Perry then portrayed in a sequence of tapestries. The stuff about class and taste was unexpectedly troubling, and messed with Shelly's idea of America a little. It was troubling because there was much she recognised. She recognised herself. She recognised her mother. She recognised their taste for sweet little tchotchkes and ornaments, things that Dan to his credit was content to live among, but only because he thought them retro or kitsch, not because he thought that they were beautiful. Anyway, she wasn't angry at her mother anymore. She had heard about a theory of good-enough parenting, which said you didn't need great parents, they only had to be good enough. She got that right, thought Shelly.

These were her thoughts as she sketched – and she was getting somewhere now, making deft little strokes in black ink on the paper. Perhaps the animus was back. Perhaps it hadn't deserted her. She worked quickly, hungrily. She had to take what she could get. That was how she'd found success, or as much of it as she had. Her real worry about Dan was that they were different types of people. She sometimes worried that instead of rising to his plane, she would somehow drag him down to her way of living, that life for both of them would be a hardscrabble affair. She was used to that, but Dan wasn't. He wasn't cut out for it. She knew he would have said that she was being ridiculous, but who was to say that in joining their lives together they would end up in clover instead of flailing in the mire?

Just as she was making progress, she heard a commotion, a wild flummoxed beating in the air behind her head. This turned out to be some sort of swallow that had flown in.

It swooped about a bit, then flew hard at a pane of glass. Dazed and distressed, it made circles near the ceiling. ‘Oh!’ she said, surprised, attempting to shoo it out. She couldn’t hope to reach it, not even by standing on a chair, so she went to get the others to see if they could help. She gave a hurried explanation and they all came traipsing in, with one of the residents joking, ‘How many artists does it take to evict a bird?’

‘Save a bird,’ corrected Shelly. ‘We want to save the bird.’

But when they got the studio, they found it had saved itself, having flown out through a window into the evening, and the artists checked their works for streaks of swallow poop.

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That night they set off for the square, heading towards the sound of music. The road was quaint and cobbled as a village road ought to be, but many of the houses displayed for-sale signs. *En venda, en venda*. They passed the statue of the youth, the village *timbaler* whose drumming, as legend had it, had bounced off the pillars of Les Agulles and made enough noise to frighten Napoleon’s infantry.

On reaching the crowded square, they met up with Elias. A guy from the village who was friendly with Dan, he had kept a table for them by spreading out his jacket. The concert started well enough, although as Shelly remarked, it didn’t seem all that authentic. A variety talent format, it was satirical in tone. Elias translated from Catalan as the emcee spoke, giving an introduction to the idea of the night. He said the village wanted to impress Sheldon Addison, the American tycoon who planned to build a EuroVegas. ‘You’ve seen the newspapers?’ Elias asked in a loud whisper. ‘Madrid and Barcelona are competing as the location. They both want to be chosen as the home of EuroVegas. Well,

the emcee is saying he wants this village to be chosen instead. He is saying he hopes the EuroVegas will come here.'

The crowd laughed and clapped and then the music started. An operatic quartet sang an aria, but the emcee came back saying it wasn't good enough. 'He is saying to the singers it must be more American.' The quartet came back out having changed into sequinned drag. They sang a Vegas-style show tune to more laughter and applause.

'Really?' said Shelly. 'So America is, what, Vegas?'

'It's a parody,' smirked Carlos, while Elias looked sheepish.

From there things went downhill. The next act was a teenage boy in blackface and basketball shorts. He shot several hoops, then several more blindfolded. 'That's just racist,' Shelly said. 'I have had enough.' Leaving the table, she wove through the crowd.

Dan caught her up. 'Elias says he'll come round later. You know he's embarrassed.'

They passed the park that was usually a hangout for bored youth. 'The annoying thing about anti-Americanism,' Dan said as they walked, 'is that I really dislike a lot of Americans. I mean, I've had to live with my American family. I went to a school that was full of Americans. I've worked with them. I *know*.'

'I don't even care. I just want to go home.'

'It's only two more days.'

'Two more days – then what? I don't want to go to New York. The job market will be tough. The other applicants will have college degrees.'

'So we won't go to New York.'

'You didn't go to grad school for nothing.'

They walked back to the *masia* and lit a fire in the firepit to wait for the meteor shower that was meant to come that night. By the time the others trailed back, they had hooked up a set of speakers and Shelly was dancing with her hands in the air. Elias came

too and was the life of the party. Fetching a bath towel from the house, he used it to tell a joke about nuns in a convent and, for the finale, folded the towel origami-style into an oversized penis. As everyone gasped and laughed, Dan photographed the phallus. When somebody remarked how good the pictures were, he said, 'That's why I spent a hundred grand on photography school, to take towel penis photos using my iPhone.'

Later they tramped across a field, lay on the furrowed dirt and watched as meteors streaked to the horizon. At the first spot of light, Shelly cried out, astonished. After about a minute, another spot fell towards Montserrat, which showed as a hulking shape against the northeastern sky.

'You guys know what?' she said. 'We should go up the mountain. Not now, in the morning. We should go up there first thing.'

'Yeah,' someone enthused. 'We should go see the Black Madonna.'

There was general agreement that this was a great idea.

The shower was meant to go on till dawn but gradually people went to bed. Elias left when he got a text from some girl he knew. Dan and Shelly stood up too and picked their way back to the house. They set an alarm for seven, then crawled beneath the mosquito net. When the alarm went off, it seemed they'd hardly slept at all.

'Are we doing this?' said Shelly.

'It's now or never, right?'

It was true. It was their last day bar one. The couple from Vermont would be arriving that afternoon, and then their time would be given over to handover and packing. Dragging herself out of bed, Shelly pulled on some clothes. No-one met them downstairs. Everyone was sleeping. By this time they were committed, so they headed to the main road and Shelly stuck out her thumb. It wasn't a minute before somebody stopped, a bleary-eyed office worker driving to Barcelona. He agreed to drop them at the turn-off to

the mountain and let them out at a petrol station, saying *bona sort*. They scouted their next ride by the pumps – a family from Huntsville, Texas, en route to the monastery. ‘Climb on in,’ said the father, a broad man in a linen shirt. They had spare seats in the back of their rented people-mover, behind two strapped-in, straw-haired boys. On the drive to Montserrat, the boys’ mother asked them questions, like why were they in Spain and what did they do for work.

‘Why, they’re independently wealthy!’ her husband interrupted.

‘We’re not any sort of wealthy,’ Dan felt compelled to say. ‘Except that we live in the first world. And we’re wealthy in love, of course.’

‘That’s the best kind, honey.’ The woman’s smile was beatific.

The gradient increased as they climbed the mountain road. Below lay fields and vineyards, towns and motorways. When they came to the parking lot, Dan and Shelly thanked the Texans. Walking ahead, they joined the line for the Black Madonna. Although shorter than last time, the queue still extended out of the church. The people ahead of them didn’t look like newlyweds seeking blessings; there were blond Russians taking photos, some bored-looking Chinese, and Germans pressing forwards in sandals and drill shorts.

When they entered anteroom, both of them fell silent, Shelly because she was tired and Dan because he wanted, as a non-Catholic, to be respectful in the church. No-one else felt that way; people spoke excitedly. A priest came out to shush them with an angry ‘*Por favor!*’ The room was shamed into silence, but after the priest left the hubbub rose again.

They had twelve paces to go, then eleven, then just ten. Ahead of them in the line, people were going crazy and snapping with their cameras. It turned out they were photographing a poster of the Madonna. There was a sub-queue in the queue to pose

beside the poster. When they had five paces to go, the group in front of them reached the statue. Lunging at the thing, they threw themselves upon it. They were crying and kissing it in an ecstatic frenzy.

‘How can we follow that?’ whispered Dan. ‘What if we’re not that moved?’

Then, pushed forward by the line, they were before the carved wood statue. This was it, their turn. Shelly’s first thought was prosaic: she had read that the Virgin’s blackness was the result of candle smoke, but seeing the glossy face she wondered if that was true. Perhaps the years of being kissed had buffed the wood to a high dark shine. Behind them feet were already shuffling, willing them to move on. Was she supposed to pray? Or study the artefact’s details? Or simply surrender to the experience?

She shot an anxious glance at Dan, who looked just as bewildered. Then all at once they were displaced. The line had moved them past the statue and now it carried them through the church. Then that was it; they were outside, deposited blinking in the sun.

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They didn’t discuss the Black Madonna, because what was there to say? They weren’t yet ready to own up to how underwhelmed they felt, suspecting the blame lay with themselves rather than the statue; they were the ones with a deficit of feeling. Walking back was more direct than going around by road, so they took this way and then that down the steep descent, following the crude white signs that marked the forest trails. At first, as they descended, they could hear the boys’ choir in the church. The sound bounced off the ramparts and came from all directions. Inspired to whistle a few notes, Dan heard his own echo. ‘This is one great place for whistling, which is why I ought to live here.’

‘Count me out,’ said Shelly, feeling out of sorts.

Not far off stood Les Agulles, the range they had gazed at through the summer while floating in the village pool. She knew they would look back on this summer as something special in their lives, would talk about it at length, casting it as a golden time, even though in truth she had struggled to enjoy it and spent most of the summer feeling thwarted and miserable.

The hike did not go well. They remembered they weren’t hikers. The sun’s heat became oppressive, even in the shade. Her knees went to jelly after the steep descent. The path twisted and turned, and paths hived off left and right. There were no more quaint white signs. ‘Has to be the way,’ said Dan, who was typically unconcerned, but at some point she realised that he was faking his unconcern. She was openly concerned and said her knee was hurting. It had been an hour, then two hours, then two and a half. Seeing that morale was dangerously low, Dan played his workout app as they forged ahead, and the sounds of cheering and applause followed them on the trail, albeit at a volume that was not really sufficient, so that it sounded like the cheers were coming from tiny, distant gnomes.

At a fork, they saw two trails going off into the trees. ‘Seriously,’ she said. This was why she did not do nature. She took the left trail, Dan the right. They agreed to text each other if they saw signs of life. Going on, she thought hatefully of the Black Madonna. It isn’t fair, she thought. They would never know good luck, it would elude them all their days. And Dan – did he even get that things could go bad for people? Yet at some point, through her anger, she recalled the wonder of what she was doing, walking through a wood in a country that wasn’t hers. It was something she never would have imagined doing. I’m the strong one, she thought, forgetting her sore knee. She was the one with an

instinct for survival. This was a part she could inhabit, a good-enough legacy she could claim.

She trailed up one more rise. She saw pitched roofs, a curve of road. Houses on the ridge! She thanked God and the baby Jesus and Madonnas black and white. If she'd had one before her she would happily have kissed it. It was a village. Not theirs, but a village was a village. She shouted and laughed and messaged Dan. 'Take the left trail.' When he didn't reply, she called him, but the call went to voicemail. She had to run back for him, which she did with a springy step. Her throat burning with joy, she shouted for Dan. Then there he was, looking infinitely relaxed, leafing through a book like a man of leisure. Well, if he wasn't worried, good for him. Her pale, anaemic-looking angel. He was precious to her. Essential.

'I called. I couldn't reach you.'

'Oh,' he said, shamefaced. 'What was I thinking?' He had flattened the battery by playing the workout app all that time. This meant, though they didn't know it, that he did not see the reminder he'd set months ago for their flight, which was not tomorrow as they thought but that afternoon. It was the second alert, the first having sounded the evening before, making its little *ping* as Carlos was saying they should get married, and Dan, in his distraction and concern for Shelly, had swiped it away in haste.

'I saw houses, this way.'

'Houses?'

'We're one town off, I think.'

'That'll do us.'

They were both taken over by a sort of delirium, and in the blissful hour that followed, the interval between finding signs of human inhabitation and getting back to

the colony and the phone chargers in their room, she considered them blessed, even invulnerable. On flying out tomorrow they might go anywhere, she thought.

‘You know, as soon as I’m divorced, I’m going to marry you,’ she said.

‘Are you now,’ Dan smiled, looking childishly happy, and swinging his hands with ease as she led the way.

6. An Invitation

At the start, it was Nikolai who impressed Paul, of the pair. Nikolai Kalinin, fortyish and greying, with his urbane good manners and habitual frown of concentration. Darya, at a decade younger, was not in the mould of a glamorous second wife. She dressed neatly but plainly and did not go in for makeup. She had lank fawn-coloured hair that she pulled back in a bun. With her jutting lower jaw she had a look of determination. Later on, when he got to know her, Paul thought she was beautiful, but she was not the sort of woman he noticed on the metro – not among the striking faces he saw in the carriages, the faces of people from across the old republics who came to Moscow to try their luck.

He had moved to the city for his own mundane reasons. On finishing a term at a scruffy school in Luton, he had learned that his next contract would not start until the autumn. He was known for being fair, even-tempered, unflappable. A geography teacher of three years' experience, he knew how to settle a class, although one or two boys thought they could tell him to fuck off *sir*, and the girls could switch quickly from flirtation to insolence. The idea of going to work in Moscow came from his college friend Julius. Working as a private tutor, Julius was making the faintly obscene amount of forty pounds an hour. He said he could send off Paul's CV to the agency he'd used. 'Come for the summer,' he said excitedly. 'See if you don't like it. This place is literally insane.'

Russia appealed as something bold, a wide impressive country. The reality was initially something of a let-down: his first job, through a long and cloyingly humid summer, saw him living in a sterile gated community. He worked for a family who had made it big in fertiliser. He was tasked with tutoring their twins, an identically sullen pair of boys. He was supposed to be grooming them for an English boarding school – the

prospectus had been sent for and was shown to him when it came – but he couldn't have cared less about polish and etiquette.

He wouldn't have stayed for a job like that. It was just three months, anyway, and he made the best of things – striking out in his free time from his position in the sticks, pounding footpaths in his sneakers and sweating in the humidity. Julius had decamped, which was a Julius thing to do; he had followed his girlfriend Sarah to live in St Petersburg. But he'd put Paul in touch with his expatriate friends and so Paul dutifully sought them out, slogging into town to meet them. There was the Australian management consultant who worked in the resources sector and said smugly of his firm, 'We're very boutique.' There was a Scottish party boy who took him to a nightclub where all the girls were getting high on balloons of nitrous oxide gas. But getting home, that was the trouble. At night it took forever. It wasn't always worth the trek.

Come August, he received the email from Luton. There would be no new job, he learned; the numbers had shifted, very sorry but there we are. This was when Nikolai stepped into the breach. He had asked the agency for a native English speaker, Oxbridge preferably, available at short notice. In an informal interview, he spoke to Paul as an equal, treating him as a thinking person. He engaged him in conversation on EU monetary policy, asking him what he thought should be done on Greece and sounding more like a technocrat than a businessman. He touched briefly on his work as an 'operations guy', saying, 'People don't know how much care and expertise goes into production. I work on brownfields, mature fields. To maintain output is complex, delicate. It's jeweller's work, as we say in Russian.' He spoke frankly about his family situation: his ex-wife, Mrs Kalinin, had been diagnosed with lupus, an illness that made her tired all the time. He had recently brought their son, four-year-old Anton, to live with him and his girlfriend. He led the shy boy into the room, prompting a 'Hello, Mr Kilvert.' When Nikolai checked

his watch, which protruded from his cuff and the dark pelt of his wrist hair, Paul saw it was an ordinary plastic Casio.

He started soon afterwards. His new employers were – thank Christ – nothing like his last. Instead of sequestering themselves in an outer suburb, they lived in the centrally-located Yakimanka district. They were close enough to the old Tretyakov Gallery for him to walk there with Anton to look at the paintings. There were no hulking retainers, just an ageing driver who lived in a flat in a next-door building and a heavily-built woman who came twice a week to clean. The Kalinin flat was large and solidly comfortable. Taking up a whole floor of a Brezhnev-era building, it showed no sign of ever having been updated. Paul had his own modest flat several floors below, and when it was time for Anton's lesson, his father or Darya brought him down in the lift.

It was usually Darya who came to his door, dropping Anton off before she went out to run errands – or, as the weather cooled, before she went nowhere at all, staying at home instead to binge-watch *Breaking Bad*. He learned that she used to work selling TV advertising, but had given up the job because she was away too much, going with Nikolai to the dacha near Tula (this was where he kept and rode his beloved horses) or accompanying him on trips further afield. Lately there were no such jaunts, or if there were she was left at home. 'At least I have this one,' she said brightly, tousling Anton's hair, though the boy hadn't yet warmed to her as he would in time. Belting her coat securely, she would run out to buy cigarettes, only ever paying cash so 'Koly' wouldn't know. 'Koly', which she pronounced like the first part of 'cauliflower', was what she called Nikolai, her pet name for him.

Paul's focus was Anton; he tried to coax him out of his shell. His young student was placid. Not fast to learn, but willing. He had his father's dark hair, a prominent lower lip, and a taste for licking crayons in contemplative moments. Paul, who had never taught

primary school, felt the need to earn his keep, so he swotted online and planned learning activities. Anton played with the flash cards that Paul ordered online, he counted and coloured in, he strung sentences together, and Paul was surprised to find he enjoyed the work. It was not that anyone kept close tabs on what he did; he saw Nikolai less and less as the autumn went on and whenever he did look in he had an embattled look. His divorce from Anton's mother had gone halfway, then stalled. Perhaps it was the lupus; perhaps he was under fire at work.

Paul did not meet Anton's mother, but she was present by her absence. Her disease was almost lunar, the way it waxed and waned. It confounded her doctors and by extension Nikolai, who had a rationalist's faith in medical science. Mrs Kalinin's condition was frequently discussed, and there were times when it looked like she might take Anton back. Paul had to wonder what Darya made of this. She had an ex-husband too, but he was practically never mentioned. Paul knew only that he had fought for Russia in Chechnya; Darya would later say, in a comment he found shocking, that it would have been better if he had died there.

The cold was deepening, but Paul was just getting to know the city. In his off-hours he ran long distances through the streets, drawing looks from pedestrians who thought he was insane. Flush with his earnings, he booked a walking tour. He selected Angelica from the Real Guides Of Russia website. Her page had by far the most positive reviews, so he put aside the fact that her photo was mawkish, showing her sniffing a daffodil. He was disappointed to find her a woeful guide: she drifted rather than led, took him to a closed cathedral, and muddled up the types of tickets for the Kremlin. He had hoped to be dazzled by tales of Napoleonic battles but she knew as much history as an indifferent high school student. In fact she was, as she told him, a university student, moonlighting for the money and to practice speaking English. He enjoyed her company so he didn't mind too

much. Over a drink, she helped him to say her name correctly, using the softer Russian *zh*: ‘*Zh* for *zhuk*, butterfly.’ Then he helped her into her champagne-coloured puffer coat and they parted, agreeing to meet up again.

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But it was Darya, not Angelica, who seized his attention. In the middle of December, she initiated a brief affair. It took place over four nights. There were no plans or rendezvous and his flat was the sole location. For him, the whole thing was unexpected, even miraculous. His main contributions to the way things developed were to offer her vodka (her reply: ‘I can’t stand vodka’) and find a condom in the bedside drawer. Afterward, he wondered how to account for it. Had he invited her approach, given her signals? He had begun to feel drawn to her but had been careful not to show it, zeroing in on Anton whenever she was in the room.

This was how it happened. It was winter, of course, an honest-to-god winter. Anton was at his mother’s for a trial stay of a week and Nikolai was away on back-to-back trips (the first, a work excursion, took him to one of the oil company towns that dotted the tundra of the sub-Arctic north; and the second, a ski trip with his brother, saw him go straight on to the Khibiny Mountains). Darya, feeling reckless or lonely or both, came to Paul’s door in a wrap and towelling slippers, the kind that people take from swanky hotel rooms. Walking in when he opened, she took his hand and put it on her breast under the wrap. Her hair was damp from the shower but she hadn’t shaved her legs, and in what followed her stubble grazed lightly on his shins.

That was the first night. He didn’t have time to feel guilty. It just happened and then she left; there was the muffled *chunk* of the door behind her. When she returned the

following night, he didn't feel bad about that either. This time she had shaved her legs in a sign of premeditation. After having sex, they lay in the almost-dark. Tracing his abdomen, she asked him, 'Why do you look like this?' He thought it a strange question and laughed, saying, 'Rowing, I suppose.' Mostly, their conversation was light and inconsequential. She spoke about herself without revealing much, supplying cameo-like glimpses of a Russian childhood. The crystal vase by the window reminded her of one she used to wear upside down as a witch's hat. She spoke of St Petersburg, where she had grown up, recalling the boulevards and canals, the wide Neva River, the walk to Vasilevskiy Island and her father's department in a building made of granite.

The third night, she showed up with a bottle of French white wine. 'What are you doing here, Paul?' she asked in a wondering tone, the same tone she had used when she asked about his physique. Instead of answering her question, he turned it around on her. 'What are *you* doing here?' he asked. 'You mean here, in this room?'

'I mean with Nikolai,' he said. She was quick to deflect this question, saying morosely, 'Let's not talk about Koly.' But later – afterwards – she would speak of him anyway, admitting to her frustration with his behaviour. He wouldn't talk about his divorce; he said he had other things on his mind, but that hadn't stopped him from going skiing. 'Skiing!' she repeated.

The worst part, she said, was that he wasn't even close to his brother. The guy was boorish, ignorant, a disrespectful person. He had made money, it was true, but it was unclear how he'd done it. 'Where did his money come from?' she asked as if Paul would know. In the past, Nikolai had ignored his brother's invitations to go hunting on the Kola Peninsula, saying he had no wish to kill animals for sport or to sit around with his brother's cronies, drinking and singing. She couldn't understand why he was spending time with him now. 'But enough of that,' she said flatly. 'Let's talk about you.'

Paul obliged with a change of topic. He spoke expansively of wanting to travel across the country, to see its far-flung reaches – the wilds of Siberia, central Asia, the far east. He stood and refilled their glasses, then lounged back on the bed. He went into minute detail about a Werner Herzog film he'd seen, describing the people who still lived in the wilderness, solitary hunters who spent whole winters in the forest. Darya listened impatiently, then cut him off with a wave. The wine had dampened her spirits and she delivered a bleak picture of what she called 'the reality': the regions were depressed, there weren't enough jobs, petty crime was rife and heroin cheap. She mentioned a friend's mother, a pharmacist in a town Paul had never heard of: 'She's always being robbed.' She swigged her wine readily but she was nowhere near drunk; there was something controlled in her, as though she was still on guard. Before long she made an exit, ending the evening on a low.

That was it, he thought. He'd blown it. On the fourth night, he waited. He showered and cleaned his teeth. After a time he went to bed. Only then – it was after two – did he hear her knock. Having relented after all, she had come down wearing a tracksuit. When they had sex this time, it was with more urgency than before. Then she promptly fell asleep with her arm across his chest, so that he lay awake not daring to move, despite a tingling sensation and then a spreading ache. She left sometime in the morning; he had taken his turn to sleep. He returned to the question of whether he should feel bad. He thought perhaps he would feel worse when he saw Nikolai in person, but as things worked out he didn't see him for some time. Several days passed in which he didn't even see Darya, and then he flew back to England to spend Christmas with his family.

'How are the Reds?' Nan asked, a gleam in her eye. She had been removed from her aged-care home and brought to his mother's place, where she sat at the table's head like a wizened sexless queen. She gave Paul, her favourite, most of her turkey slices,

pushing the meat from her plate onto his. On his other side, his mother asked how his job was going. With her constitutional horror of inequality, she suspected he was working as a kind of servant. When she said the word ‘tutoring,’ her voice betrayed her doubt; it was as if she were stepping on a pane of glass.

There was no way to reassure her, and as soon as he could he removed himself from the house. He spent an enjoyable New Year with Julius and his girlfriend Sarah. They had holed up in a cottage in the Welsh countryside, a place that belonged to Julius’s parents and that he and Paul had used while cramming for finals. The three of them got along, taking long rambling walks. Sarah regaled them with stories of working for Russia Today, the state-owned English TV station: ‘We cover anything to do with dead Romanovs, basically. There are always calls to dig them up to test some theory or other.’ They played Monopoly and Sarah was gleeful when she won, dancing around the room and grinding on Julius, all the while singing, ‘I’m rich, I’m rich, I’m rich!’

In January, he returned to the deep cold of Moscow. He expected to find tension. What if Nikolai had found out? Or what if he looked at him and *knew*, divining the truth? He also couldn’t help but picture – and this was a contradiction – a resumption of the affair in furtive stolen moments. Instead, he got back to find his employers were still away. He had to occupy himself – going to the gym, making meals, watching TV. He downloaded adaptations of John le Carré novels, which he found passably distracting. They were well-made, full of suspense. Plus there was a murkiness to them, a moral complexity, casting doubt on who was meant to be good or bad.

Otherwise, he tried his luck with Russia Today. It was quite watchable, he found to his surprise. On January nineteenth, he caught one of Sarah’s segments. She was profiling the custom of Epiphany ice-swimming, in which the faithful dunked themselves in a hole cut in a frozen lake. Sarah took part for the program, lowering herself into the water in a

black Speedo swimsuit (modestly cut, but still showing a lot of side-boob). She burst out gasping and shook her head, saying, 'Sorry, I'm sorry.' In a later cut, looking flushed in a polar fleece, she said, 'That's certainly one way to ring in the New Year.' And Paul, suddenly lonely, muted the set and took out his phone. He found Angelica's number, Angelica with a *zh*. He sent her a message and then another when she replied, and soon afterward he began seeing her often.

Early February brought his employers back to the city. He found Darya carefully neutral, Nikolai oblivious. Yet something had changed; what it was he could not have said. In a reversal of roles, it was Nikolai he saw most. He brought his son down each morning at increasingly early times on his way to work. Paul hardly saw Darya, who was avoiding him. She stayed in bed most mornings, probably watching a new series. Taking Anton back to the Kalinin apartment, he might hear a toilet flush but she would not come out to greet him. Nikolai said she had the flu, and maybe she did. Another day, when Paul saw her, she was definitely off-colour. He was with Anton in the kitchen, giving the boy water, and Darya emerged after Anton dropped his glass. There was the smash of it on the tiles, then the boy blinked and started crying. Suddenly she was there, sweeping him up in her arms and saying in Russian, 'It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter.' Where once she had smelt of cigarettes, she now smelt faintly sour. (She had given up smoking like she had given up Paul, and these days when she went out it was to buy crisps and orange juice.) As Anton sobbed without restraint, tipping his face into her hair, she carried him from the room with hardly a look at Paul. He was left to clean up the glass, feeling crushed and irrelevant.

They only really spoke the day he glimpsed Nikolai's supposedly boorish brother. A man – he looked quite normal – visited the apartment, disappearing into a room to talk business with Nikolai. Realising who it was, Paul shot Darya a look. She was making

them coffee and setting out pastries, but she refused to acknowledge her former complicity with Paul. ‘They look thick as thieves,’ he observed, at which she took offence, pursing her lips and saying, ‘Brothers should stick together.’ Then she softened slightly; she spoke to him differently, like she hoped he would understand. ‘Before – ’ she said, pausing, then going on a low tone, ‘I didn’t know this, but Nikolai has been having problems. I didn’t believe it when he told me. You know, six years ago, when we had an oil crash, it was his fields that kept the whole business afloat!’ She picked up the plate of pastries, shaking her head. ‘And now that they’re looking at doing some big new deal, they’re trying to force him out, trying to get control of what’s meant to be his.’ She said that Nikolai held his shares on the strength of a handshake deal, the chief of the company being a friend from his school days, someone he had trusted. ‘Poor Koly!’ she said without irony.

To go by the change in her, this newfound loyalty of hers, he suspected the divorce must be back in motion. Well, good for her, he thought. He was dating Angelica. Their relationship was strangely distant, even a little formal. She came over sometimes but he hadn’t been to her place. She didn’t add him on Facebook even though he knew she used it. He accepted – he enjoyed – the element of mystery. He didn’t press her because he remembered Millie Beecham, whom he had dated at Churchill College, telling him he could be – her word – insufferable. ‘You’re always looking for proof.’

‘Proof of?’ he had shot back, puzzled.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she had said, ‘your central place in things!’ He didn’t think that was so bad, but apparently she found it tiring.

There were nights when he wondered if Darya would ever knock on his door again. The less attention she paid to him the more he wondered how she felt. He went over their conversations, the things she had said and done. By day, he had things to do. Anton’s

English was improving. Paul had brought him some books from England and he read him his favourite, *The Cat In The Hat*: 'It is fun to have fun. But you have to know how.' The boy's mother was unwell, then rallying, then unwell. Yet in March, when the bad news came, it was not Mrs Kalinin but Paul's Nan back in Kent. She had broken a hip, gone to hospital and died. He was shocked by the news; no-one had told him about her fall.

'Why didn't you tell me?' he asked his mother when he flew home. She met him at Ashford Station, looking puffy yet drawn. 'I had strict instructions not to,' she told him in the drizzly car park. 'Paul will be having the time of his life, she said.'

Nan had left him her house. It was in Littleton-On-Sea, a short walk to the beach past the caravan park. It offended his mother that the house went to him alone with no share for his brother. But his grandmother's will was clear. She had also left a note, folding it into the coffee tin: 'You're a good boy, Paul. Sorry about the mess. Love Nan.' He would find this months later, after he came back to the house – this and the wardrobe full of empty Gordon's bottles, the hidden evidence of years of dedicated drinking. The week of the funeral, though, he had only just enough time to see about the roof, which had started to leak while Nan was in the home. The house couldn't be let until something was done. It really needed a whole new roof, but Paul didn't have the money. For the time being, he asked a roofer do a patch-up job.

'No guarantees,' he was told with heavy disapproval. He told the man he would have the money for the new roof by the winter. He would have to save his pennies, or roubles, he thought. He would hang on to his job. Keep his nose clean, Nan would say. That wouldn't be hard, the way things were with Darya.

Nan – what would she make of his behaviour?

He flew back that Sunday. While he had been away, Russia had annexed Crimea, and he wondered what people in Moscow made of the development. As far as he could

tell, it was business as usual. Outside the airport doors, men hunched and smoked in their leather jackets. He took the Aeroexpress, which was filled with ads for Citibank, and from each the model smiled as if possessed by a secret thrill, extending her hand in readiness to shake.

*

The family was back from Tula, where Nikolai had gone riding. Going up to get Anton, Paul had the impression of walking in on them, catching them in a private moment without their social armour. They had just entered the apartment, leaving the door open. The place had the hush of thick carpet and drapes, which took sounds from without and channelled them into little eddies – the cleaner’s portable radio playing in another room, the cranes one block over at work on a building site, and the omnipresent traffic, all made feeble and remote. It was a changeless interior, but by contrast its residents were transitory and restless. It wasn’t just the way they were always coming and going; it was more that they seemed not to inhabit the apartment, like they were merely passing through on their way to somewhere else. It was Darya taking off the scarf she had tied over her hair and leaving the bags to rummage in the fridge; it was Nikolai taking a call perched on a sofa’s edge; and it was Anton, still in his coat, ploughing his truck at the curtain hems.

They looked up when Paul appeared as if remembering he existed. ‘Paul!’ Anton cried, noticing him first. Darya said, ‘You’re back.’ Nikolai said, ‘Ah, good.’ He had a dark-eyed hunted look, but he looked at Paul properly – really looked at him through the thicket of his thoughts. He must have recalled his loss, the funeral he had attended. ‘Coffee?’ he suggested, pushing his hair back with his hand. Then he leaned back on the

sofa and Paul feared an inquisition. He was acutely aware of Darya behind him in the kitchen; she stopped moving about to listen to what was said.

Unexpectedly, Nikolai issued an invitation. ‘Why don’t you come with us to St Petersburg at Easter? You ought to see the city.’ The invitation was issued firmly, more in the manner of an instruction. Paul felt a curious mix of relief and caution. Nikolai added perceptively, ‘And your friend is there, isn’t he?’

How did he know that? Then Paul remembered how. Julius had been his referee for the job. It was like Nikolai to recall a detail like that, a person’s address on a CV.

Darya returned with a bottle of Evian. Speaking in English, Nikolai told her, ‘I asked Paul if he’d like to come with us to Peter.’

‘Oh?’ she said, smoothing her hair. A slight colour came to her cheeks, which was the first reaction he had observed in her all this time, the first sign their affair had been in any way real to her. ‘You should come,’ she said. Her voice held no enthusiasm but even so a surge went through him.

‘What takes you to St Petersburg?’ he asked, feeling cheerful. He would never usually have pried into their business, but Darya and Nikolai answered in unison.

‘Family,’ she said, just as he said, ‘Business.’

Paul went on to give a polite refusal – the offer was very kind but he had existing plans, what a shame he could not escape. Nikolai was nonplussed. He’d expected a yes. All the same, that afternoon, he offered Paul a ride; it so happened they were going out at the same time. The BMW slid up, shining in the bright spring day. Paul got in the back, plunging into the leather seat. Nikolai sat next to the driver and turned on the radio.

‘Anywhere near Arbat Street – ’ Paul leaned forward to say, only to be silenced when Nikolai raised a hand. He was listening with a frown to Echo of Moscow, the liberal station. It was a Russian-language station, which Paul normally couldn’t follow. This

time, though, the presenter was conducting an interview in English, speaking to someone from an environmental group. The activist claimed an oil pipeline had ruptured in pristine forest, adding, 'It happens all the time, these pipes are old and rusty, Soviet era.' Nikolai made a tsk-tsk sound, expressing disapproval. This would never happen on his watch, he seemed to be saying; this was not the jeweller's work he had once described to Paul.

The program went on in Russian and Paul got out of the car. He walked to the café, which belonged to a French chain. He liked it for the coffee, which was served charmingly in bowls, while Angelica was in favour of Western chains in general. In its warmth he forgot all about his employers, and soon Angelica came in from the stinging air. She was usually languid, even a little docile looking, but this afternoon she looked troubled and said she had something to tell him.

'My name is Emma,' she announced. 'It isn't Angelica.'

'Oh, I see.' He didn't see, but it could be a Russian thing, a Russian nickname thing.

'There is an Angelica,' she went on cautiously. She toyed with a sugar sachet, tipping it end to end. The real Angelica, she said, had worked successfully as a guide. With more and more bookings coming in, she had recruited other young women with good English and dark hair. She still took all the bookings that came via her page but, after skimming off a profit, divvied the jobs up between her protégées.

'You're kidding,' Paul said, amazed. He pictured the fake Angelicas fanning out across the city. He realised that this made sense of a few things, like how Angelica/Emma did not always turn when he called her name and the use of the daffodil to obscure her face in the Real Guides photo. This last thought made him laugh, and Angelica/Emma looked relieved.

'I should have told you,' she said, 'but I didn't know how.'

‘It doesn’t matter. Why should it?’ Though he did feel slightly cheated – all that stuff about *zh* for *zhuk*! He saw her more clearly now, as if knowing her real name helped. Emma – a perfectly good name, and yet whatever mystique she’d had fell away as he looked at her. He noticed the smudges of foundation that didn’t quite match her cheeks, and the bulbousness of her nose, which was pink after her walk.

She put her hands on his. ‘I’m sorry.’

He didn’t pull away, not wanting to be rude. Instead he waited for their drinks and then picked up his coffee, saying, ‘Really, I understand, don’t even think about it.’

*

The train was bolting north. They passed birch forests and wooden dachas. Darya looked out and sighed then got up wordlessly. She went out of the carriage, leaving Paul to rub his forehead. She hadn’t wanted him to come, but here he was anyway, imposing.

It was the Wednesday before Easter and they were taking the fast train. Just the two of them, as fate had it, in facing business class seats. Nikolai had been delayed; he would follow with Anton later. This might have been a good thing but in fact they sat in silence, Darya staring at an iPad while he looked at his phone. He saw the blue dot of a new email from Julius. It was a mock-serious itinerary he had written for Paul’s visit. There were items like (for that evening) ‘P. meets J. for a late drink at Schastye,’ and (for the next morning) ‘S. and J. make love quietly in order not to wake P., but close enough to P. to feel the adrenaline of having sex in public.’

Looking up, he saw Darya coming back with two Chupa Chups from the dining car. She offered him one with a proposition: ‘From now on, let’s be friends, let’s be as innocent as children.’ He gazed back at her then nodded. ‘Alright.’ Looked relieved, she

took her seat as they unwrapped their lollipops. (Paul's was caramel, hers was a strawberry swirl.) And the deal was all it took for the tension to fall away. Darya's smile made her look brighter than she had in weeks; it was as if she had emerged from a winter slump.

On easy terms again, they relaxed into the journey. She asked him what he wanted to see in St Petersburg and what he had seen so far in Moscow. When he said he had seen the Kremlin, she rolled out another of her Russian childhood stories, this one about a party she'd been to, held for children at the Kremlin on New Year's Eve one year. There had been games and sweets, she said, but the crazy thing was the end. Just when the kids were getting tired and crashing out after the sugar, the guards had made them stand face-out in a circle. At this point they blinded them with spotlights, which was meant to allow their parents – or an aunt, in Darya's case – to find and retrieve them, but the children were distraught and promptly started wailing. Darya laughed as she told the story, and Paul smiled back at her. He would have liked to reciprocate but he thought his childhood dull, too boringly suburban to be of any interest.

Instead he took out the *Moscow Times*, the English paper he sometimes read, if only to see what they dared to print. He scanned the day's headline, 'Ukraine launches military operations', which topped a photo of troops holding firearms in a field. The story reported that Ukrainian forces had retaken an airfield from pro-Russian militants. He asked Darya what she made of the crisis. She merely looked baffled and said with disarming frankness, 'Oh, I don't understand it. You know Russians, Ukrainians – we're all the same people.'

Now the train stopped. It was a town with a lumber yard. Darya slept a little and Paul saw her iPad screen, which showed a page with information on Miami, Florida. There were palm trees and beaches, pink stucco facades, and a windswept blonde woman with a baby in her arms. He guessed she wanted a holiday, perhaps some warmer weather.

Across the aisle, a German businessman was just then returning to his seat only to find that someone had taken it. His business associates, two Russians, would not evict the interloper, a thuggish guy who moved his lips as he read a text. The German looked displeased but took a seat a few rows back. At this point Darya woke again and looked at her open tabs.

‘You want to go to Miami?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps.’ Looking embarrassed, she put the tablet in her bag.

‘If it’s beaches you’re after, you really can’t go past England.’

This made her smile. She humoured him. ‘Oh can’t I?’

So he told her about Nan’s house, which was bizarrely his house now. He told her how it was near the beach, which was just a short stroll away. He was competing, improbably, with those white Miami beaches, pitting himself against them in a ludicrous contest. He mentioned the fishing sheds that gave the beach character. He left out the two power stations that loomed over the point, and was similarly selective when he described the house itself, skipping over its pokiness, the damp-buckled linoleum.

‘Is it a sandy beach?’ she asked, playing along.

‘Shingle.’

‘Shingle?’

‘You know, with pebbles and shells.’

‘Ah.’

‘You’d like it to be sandy.’

‘If that could be arranged.’

It was his turn to smile. He was enjoying the game, which met the terms of their agreement. It was a way of pretending that things could be different, that a person – that Darya – might pick Kent over Miami, shingle over sand. He was hardly aware of the

passing scenery (an abandoned factory, an electricity substation). He did briefly take note of the head-kicker's departure, which meant that the German man could now reclaim his seat. His two associates were trying to placate him, explaining that some people have limited life options, but he looked (Paul registered) distinctly unimpressed. Anyway, it hardly mattered; they were nearing their destination. The journey grew more picturesque – a shallow lake, nicer dachas, slanting light on Darya's cheek – and he felt the unmixed pleasure of anticipation.

The next day, Thursday, he met his friends. He wasn't staying with them, having accepted a hotel booking. His employers had a suite in an updated wing, but he was happy with his room and its view of the river.

'What's the hotel like?' Julius asked him.

'I shouldn't snipe.'

'Go on.'

He felt disloyal in saying, 'Purple chandeliers in the lobby.'

'Amazing,' said Sarah, who was in excellent spirits. She was just back from Kazakhstan, where she had interviewed an astronaut right before he had launched for the International Space Station. Together, she and Julius were adversarial and joyous. They asked after Angelica, smiling winkingly. Paul said she was well, which was probably true. Wasn't the real Angelica raking it in, profiting off the labour of her lookalike guides? He didn't say things were tapering off with Angelica/Emma, that he hadn't responded to her latest text.

Keeping to the itinerary, they went to the Dostoyevsky Museum. There were letters home from the writer's travels in Europe, full of a disgruntled traveller's complaints. As they wandered around, Julius and Sarah spoke of using their savings to buy 'a little house in Bulgaria' where they would grow their own tomatoes and write a television screenplay.

‘Everyone’s doing it,’ Julius said. He wanted to write a thinly-veiled drama ripping off his experiences working for Russia’s rich. ‘*The Nanny Diaries* but for Russia.’ He was collecting little details for authenticity, like how in Russia the cost of dogs was in inverse proportion to their size, ‘on a scale from chihuahua to, I don’t know, Great Dane?’

He launched into a story about his former employer, a philanderer who had won his wife back with a dirty trick. It was a soap-opera worthy plot-line: the man’s wife, moving on, had started dating their plumber, so he’d paid a prostitute to stage a car accident with the guy as a prelude to starting an affair. This was meant to prove to his wife that all men were cheats. ‘It worked,’ said Julius, looking radiant with glee. Pretty soon he was angling for material from Paul, but Paul resisted, saying, ‘You can’t use people like that.’

‘Why not? They’re using you.’

‘No, they’re employing me.’ He tried to say that his employers were not the badly-behaved rich. ‘He’s actually very intelligent,’ he said. ‘So is she, for that matter.’

‘That’s the thing about Russia. Even the ones with boob jobs have a view on Pushkin.’

‘She doesn’t have a boob job.’

‘Ah! So you’ve been looking. Paul Cutter’s back in business.’

Paul shook his head, annoyed – he had never liked the nickname – but Sarah’s interest had been piqued.

‘What do you mean? Why are you calling him Paul Cutter?’ Turning to Paul, she objected, ‘I thought your surname was Kilvert.’

‘We call him Paul Cutter because he likes to cut other guys’ lunches.’

‘What?’

‘Julius – ’

‘He hits on people’s girlfriends.’

‘God, I’d best look out.’ Sarah pinched Paul’s bum.

That night, they ate at a Ukrainian restaurant where no one gave any indication of the brewing hostilities, and beribboned women sang folk songs to the diners. Through one number, Julius translated, deadpan: ‘I will put a spell on you, you will not meet another woman, you will be with me, you will have to be with me.’ As they were waiting for their meals, he turned to Sarah and proclaimed, ‘Ducky, I feel so guilty. Here you are, a high-flying broadcast journalist, and how am I helping you? Dostoyevsky had Anya to take care of everything. I’m going to be a better boyfriend-slash-secretary-slash-drudge.’ Taking her phone, he started sorting her apps into labelled folders, while Sarah said, ‘You’re so sweet. Isn’t he sweet, Paul?’ But Paul had decided he was sick of their cutesiness.

The next day, Friday, he ditched the itinerary, going off-piste to meet up with Darya. They went to see a ballet at the Mariinsky Theatre. It was her idea; Paul was not a ballet fan. Nikolai was to join them but he expected to come late. Things were coming to a head at his company Petroneft. Darya had left him talking things over with her father, who, as a state geologist turned senior bureaucrat, could speak from his own experience in the sector.

As a duo, they caught a bus from the other side of Nevskiy Prospect. At first Paul felt childishly happy just to be in her company. They were surrounded by passengers also headed for the theatre, and it struck him that this was such a civilised thing to do, riding the bus to the ballet with other ballet-goers. Arriving early, they strolled to the English Embankment, but here Paul began to feel a new sense of insurrection. He had always been a person of moderate wants, yet as they walked to the river (keeping a safe distance from each other), he was aware of wanting Darya more than ever, beyond reason. What he didn’t want was the deal they had struck. He didn’t want to be her friend; he didn’t

want innocence. Preparing to say as much, he glanced at the darkening Neva River and remembered something he'd read about it – that although it looked like it flowed east, this was just an illusion, a trick of the wind, and in fact the current ran very strongly west toward the gulf. Stopping to scrutinise the water, he felt that he was like the river, hiding an unseen current, that he had never really been all that moderate or mild, and could want things as badly as any person on earth.

He hurried to catch her up, but she had just realised the time. They had to power-walk back and take their seats in a box. They squeezed in next to a Spanish family from the Canary Islands who had brought their teenage boys to round out their education. Onstage Giselle flounced and leaped, an improbably doll-like athlete. A slender-thighed Albrecht was stronger than he looked, eliciting flurries of applause. Paul joined in the clapping, impatient for the intermission, but when it finally came so did Nikolai. Seeking them out with his furrowed brow, he brought his own overriding atmosphere of drama and hurried Darya outside to talk to her privately. Through the glass, Paul saw him thrusting papers at her. He watched with dread as he saw Darya explaining, pale-faced. Then Nikolai looked chastened and swung his coat around her shoulders. Ushering her back in, he declared, 'We need champagne!' Weaving his way to the bar, he came back with two flutes, passing one to Paul and raising the other. Paul must have looked surprised that Darya was left out, because Nikolai grinned and said, 'But that's why we're drinking – to the baby!'

The baby? Paul reeled. What was he saying? He looked at Darya, who was flushed. Pregnant – but since when? He recalled the condoms they had used. He did some mental arithmetic. He couldn't be the father. It must have been Nikolai, a New Year's conception. Feeling unreasonably betrayed, he wished he could speak to her. At that moment the bell rang and he had to traipse back in. He should have been (according to the itinerary in his

phone) eating dumplings with his friends at an Uzbek restaurant. Instead he had to sit through the whole of the second act, trapped in his seat and a private tumult, imprisoned in the splendour of the *belle étage*. He was acutely aware of Nikolai putting an arm around his girlfriend, only removing it to clap as he called, 'Bravo, bravo!'

*

Darya's dad was an affable, donnish type. In a button-down shirt and cardigan at lunch the next day, he held forth at the table on the oil industry in Russia. With a degree from the city's Mining Institute, he oversaw natural resources in the Northwestern Federal District. He had a Soviet-style reverence for oil and abhorred the newer-fashioned focus on profit. He lectured Nikolai on the perils of offshore drilling, which he called 'a cat in a bag'. For Paul's benefit, he explained, 'You never know what you are going to get.'

No kidding, Paul thought darkly. It was an informal celebration. They were at Darya's parents' flat and he was there on sufferance. He took a slug of vodka and snuck a look across the table. Darya was eating determinedly and refusing to meet his gaze. Her mother, in Art Nouveau pinks and greens, had gone into the kitchen where she was making a curd cake. There was a sister – anorexic with a mouthful of bulging teeth – who came and went from the flat with a boyfriend in tow.

Talk to me, he wished to say, but Darya wouldn't meet his eyes. When she pushed her plate away, she stared at the TV in the corner with its low-volume news of skirmishes in Ukraine. Since he couldn't break through to her, he drank to pass the time and dull it. Earlier, before the lunch, there had been a lot of tedious baby talk. There was a discussion about Miami, which was where Darya wanted to go to have the baby. They debated the quality of private clinics in Moscow. 'But almost nothing has changed,' Darya said on

this score, her voice rising a little. ‘And it costs nearly as much.’ She was dealing with an agency that could organise it all; it was their mailout that Nikolai had discovered yesterday. There was further discussion about what to do with Anton, who at some point would be sent to stay with his grandparents, and it jolted Paul to know he wouldn’t be needed for much longer.

Later, escaping, he slept awhile in his hotel room. He woke up feeling groggy, but the sky was not yet dark. After splashing his face with water, he went down to the lobby and sat in a tall-backed chair, tipping his head forward and fiddling with his phone. He waited there until he saw Nikolai go out, then took the lift for the new wing and found his employers’ suite. When Darya opened the door, she told him to leave.

‘I have to talk to you.’

‘Shhh.’ She tilted her head at the doors behind her, closed on the alcove where Anton was sleeping. She reluctantly let him in, asking, ‘What is it?’

It was then he tried to tell her, speaking in a low urgent tone, what he’d realised the day before at the English Embankment. Yet instead of listening, really listening, she moved to the window and looked down at the river. Outside the sky had turned a deep Byzantine purple. On the street below, people were gathering by a church, waiting for the priest to come out and speak. It was true, Darya said slowly – and here he knew she had missed the point – the river flowed strongly out toward the gulf. ‘You know, last year,’ she said grimly, ‘a man drove off the bridge when it was raised at night. His car washed so far down that it was days before the divers found it on the bottom.’

Why was she telling him this? He tried to put his arms around her but she freed herself from him, hiding her face and saying, ‘Go, I need you to go.’ He did as she said, going out to the corridor and disappearing around a corner. After standing for several moments with his back against the wall, he heard her ask, ‘Are you there?’ Her voice was

quiet, the words lonely – the loneliest thing he had ever heard, coming though they did from someone who had no reason to be lonely, who was going to be a mother. ‘Are you there,’ she asked again, more insistently this time. Paul straightened and went back, full of an unreasoning hope. They had to be quiet so that Anton would not wake up. This was the end of things, he knew, but everything felt heightened. Whatever doubts he’d had at lunch, he did not have them in her presence, even though afterward it would seem impossible again and he would start to believe she’d never felt anything for him.

Afterward, she dressed quickly, without taking a shower. He looked at her body before she could disguise it, glimpsing before she turned away the curve of her belly, the noticeable tilt above the dark pubic patch. Putting his own clothes on, he joined her at the window and tipped his face into her hair.

‘You can’t be here,’ she said.

He left. He went to his room. As soon as he’d shut the door behind him, he took out his phone and googled, ‘sex with pregnant woman harm to unborn baby?’ Then he scrolled through the results, sagging with relief.

*

His job did not end straight away. He worked for the family until June, the start of the month, exactly a year after his arrival in Moscow. His departure, when it came, was unceremonious. It was all on the level, an amicable let-down. Only little Anton was visibly affected, holding tightly to Paul’s leg and refusing to say goodbye, hiding his face and the shame of his emotions.

There were no other positions, he learned at the agency. The recruiter, a polished woman, apologised and shook his hand, making the resin bangles clack loudly on her

arm. It was the uncertainty in the air; everyone in Moscow was watching and waiting; business was on hold; no one was hiring. From what Paul heard, the only frenetic activity was that of wealthy Russians shifting money out of the country as the rouble slipped. Putin, however, shrugged off all criticism and pivoted east to sign a new gas deal with China.

It felt strangely like defeat, flying back to England. Paul moved into the house in Kent. He started to look for jobs. In between, he tore up the buckled lino. He put buckets under new leaks, lining them with towels to silence the drips. By mid-autumn he had a job. The school was posh, the kind of place that would once have made him feel like a sell-out. But he liked the boys in his classes, their deferential manners. ‘Tell us about Russia, sir,’ they would say to put off a lesson. It was not long after he started there that the *Financial Times* called. The reporter was Owen Dorsey, who’d got his number from Julius. Julius was still in Russia but he was thinking of leaving too – not for the house in Bulgaria, which was no longer mentioned, but to work for his dad’s property development firm.

When Owen rang, he explained that he was working on a profile. Paul, who knew Owen but only vaguely, said, ‘Keep me out of it, won’t you.’

‘You’re not that interesting, don’t worry. I’m just fact checking, yeah?’

Owen, he now recalled, had always fancied himself as clever. Joining the fourth estate had done nothing to humble him. The subject of his profile was Nikolai Kalinin – ‘our lesser-known oligarch,’ he cheerily called him.

Paul had pulled over to talk. He was on his way home from work. Other cars were whooshing by, their headlights flaring across the marsh. He frowned into the phone at Owen’s use of ‘oligarch.’ ‘That’s a bit strong,’ he said. ‘I don’t know if I’d call him that.’

He knew bits and pieces; he knew Nikolai had done well. Cannily selling his interests before the oil price slid too far, he had bought an estate in Scotland, stables included.

‘Oh, come off it, Kilvert. There’s no need to be bashful.’

‘Who else have you spoken to?’

‘Plenty of people, but everyone’s keeping fairly shtum.’

‘What about his wife?’

‘Which one?’

The question threw him for an instant. Then he understood. Of course Darya had become the new Mrs Kalinin. Of course they were married, that was how things happened. Even so, he was caught off guard. The thought dogged him for days, recurring at odd hours in the night or during class.

Two weeks after the call, the newspaper ran the story. Paul bought a copy on his way home, taking it down to the beach to read it. Sure enough, there was the stuff about Nikolai getting out handsomely, the Scottish estate and stables. There was talk of him buying a racehorse from the Queen. As for Petroneft, the company he had left, the report gave details of a deal it had struck with a major foreign outfit. Having won the licence for a bluefield site offshore, they had launched a joint venture to go into the Arctic proper. This must be the deal that Darya had mentioned that time; the only mystery was how Nikolai had come out of things so well.

It was cold on the beach, and the breeze rattled the pages. The shingle was hard to sit on and clung to his trousers when he stood up. Brushing himself off, he thought of how foolish he had been, asking Darya here. She would have had a September baby, he thought, counting the months. She’d now be leaving Miami if she hadn’t already. Strange to think of her in London, passing through on her way to Scotland, but then her London was not his London. They were completely different cities.

How *had* Nikolai turned the tables? he wondered, walking back. How had he scuppered the attempt to do him out of his shares, getting one up on whoever had tried to cheat him? By this time it was dark, but under the streetlights Paul saw that all the recycling bins were out. He remembered something more about that lunch in St Petersburg. After they had eaten, in that slow dragging hour, Nikolai had cut into the older man's speechifying and murmured something to him. Paul understood the reply: 'You don't know where this will end.' This didn't stop Nikolai, who pressed some papers at his host. A manila file fell open and photographs slid out, and Paul saw the images before Nikolai scooped them up. Shots of blackish oil clogging swampland and creeks. A report of some kind too, with the word 'Nenets' in the title, referring to the northern region where Petroneft had operations. The older man looked appalled, sighed heavily and sat back so that his cardigan fell open at both sides of his belly.

That wasn't all Paul had forgotten; reaching the bungalow, he remembered the conversation they had gone on to have next. With Darya still glued to the television news, he had loudly offered Nikolai the use of the house in Littleton. It was, as he knew, a ridiculous offer. It would never be accepted, which was why he could safely make the gesture in an airy, offhand way. No one had to know that it wasn't a large house, that it wasn't the kind of place where people came down for a weekend. He had described the beach, the canals – 'like St Petersburg's!' He was aware of Darya, who sat stiffly, listening. He meant for her to hear; he wanted to punish her, and so he took the game they had played together on the train, took what had been private and made it a general thing, open to all and therefore valueless. 'Any of you,' he told them blandly. 'You'd be very welcome.'

Darya had glanced at him before looking away. It was as if he had torn the house down before her eyes. And that was the moment he felt bad. More than bad, he felt

ashamed. Even so he did not stop talking, he couldn't stop talking. By then he had drunk a lot, which was why he'd forgotten all this later. The other men had been drinking too, but it was he who got drunk. It was he who, on offering Nikolai a splash, accidentally called him 'Koly,' Darya's intimate name for him. The slip surprised them both. His boss let out a harsh laugh and they stared at each other before Paul laughed too.

On the path outside Nan's house, he scrunched up the newspaper. The recycling bin was full, which meant he had to use some force to wedge the paper down the side, shifting glass bottles so that they chinked in a cosy way. That morning before work, running out of coffee grounds, he had gone searching for the tin of instant. He had finally found it, plus Nan's note. *You're a good boy, Paul.*

The words had comforted him then, but tonight he wondered whether there wasn't also a hint of complicity in her words, a glimmer of something cynical and knowing. He was uneasy as he flipped the lid on the plastic bin, covering his work of the night before. That was when, labouring in darkness so the neighbours wouldn't see, he had tipped in bottle after bottle from the supply in the back room. Now he had only to grip the handle and manoeuvre the heavy load, easing it down to the familiar street.

7. Joyride

My boss at the café often flirted with men. She was petite, in her mid-sixties, and had the face of a woodland creature – small, inquisitive, bright-eyed, with blinking dark lashes. Years of wearing heavy earrings had dragged at her earlobes, making two vertical slits of the piercing holes, but this did not stop her wearing a pair of large gold hoops. She was single and unencumbered and she liked to enjoy herself. If she forgot somebody's name, she breezily told them, 'Good to see you.' If she wanted to compliment someone, she told them they looked great. She disliked creepy men, shrinks and feminists, but she wasn't dogmatic; she made exceptions for people. She once told me she had seen Germaine Greer on TV. 'The interviewer said that her marriage had failed. "No," she said. "It was just short." I thought good on her. She looked great.'

She had been married once herself, to a man who lived in France. Their union had been brief. It left no bitter feelings. There was nothing austere in her habit of wearing black; she cut the front out of her tops to show her tanned décolletage. She had not dated for some time but hadn't gone off men, and flirting with them brightened her regimented life. She held the lease at the café where she worked six days a week. Once a year, she took a break and holidayed somewhere warm. Otherwise she worked non-stop, insisting, 'I feel great.'

The café was her dominion. It sat on a hill overlooking Sydney Harbour. Cut off from the city by a loop of expressway, it was almost but not quite stranded, kept apart from the skyscrapers. Inside, the sun streamed in through the old sash windows, striking the gleaming floors and jars of preserved lemons. Forever afraid of losing of her lease, Margot was shameless in courting the owner of the building. She plied him with lunches

and wedges of chocolate torte. She hoped he wouldn't realise he was footing her power bills, a detail that had slipped his notice for years.

She was a terrible flirt with the electrician too. She sent him coquettish texts when the oven gave her trouble. We teased her about it, but she denied what she was doing. 'Don't be revolting, Rowan, I shudder to think,' she said, tapping out a message full of exclamation marks. Other times she came clean, saying, 'I know, I'm vile.' Or: 'I'm a dirty dog.'

There was also her boyfriend, as we called him. He was a former prime minister, one of the Labor greats. Coming in for lunch, he took a table near the counter with his back to the room. She had never voted him into office but told him, 'Darling, *great* to see you.' She would sit down with him unasked, saying, 'The girls will bring you bread.' He was a willing participant, addressing her as 'doll.' They spoke together in low tones like long-time confidants. He liked to know how business was and complimented her cooking. 'You could call that a terrine,' he said of her veal loaf. She had known lots of famous people and was never overawed. She had once served 'Pompidou himself' as she liked to say, selling him a newspaper in the ski town of Auron. The president of France did not expect to have to pay but she had been game enough to make him cough up the money.

These were harmless flirtations, flashes in the pan. Her next crush was different. Instead of taking place in the café, it unfolded in a flurry of emails and texts. She tried to hide it at first, but it turned out that she was flirting with her husband, Charles Bernard, from whom she had been estranged for more than three decades. 'And why not, I'd like to know? Why shouldn't I write to him?' she asked. I had walked past her laptop and glimpsed a photo on the screen. A flash of red, a green background that might have been grass or trees, and sunlight glancing off a shiny bald pate. Margot loved email; she loved the thrill of a back-and-forth. Her emails were like her texts: quick-fire compositions,

never more than a few lines, with ‘you’ rendered as ‘u’ and strings of ‘xxx’ for kisses. She would tap these missives out in the glow of the bright screen, wearing an expression of unmitigated glee.

Before this, she hadn’t spoken much about her husband. Her marriage wasn’t even her longest relationship: in the seventies and eighties, she had spent seventeen years with a ceramicist named Erik. He had made the original brown-glazed cups and saucers for the café, although most had since been lost to gradual attrition.

After some pressing, she showed us the photo. Here was Charles, now retired, shown wearing a flying suit. He stood in a field with a helmet under one arm. Beside him was an aircraft that looked too flimsy to be real. The plane – was it a plane? – looked like a red toy. It was a microlight, Charles wrote. He had taken up flying as a hobby. *A grand passion*, he said. He was working towards getting his passenger licence. *Any interest?* he asked her, adding a winky face. As a PS, he sent a link. It led to a website with the banner *Microlighting is freedom!*

Like ur onesie, she fired back. *Not sure abt the jet.*

There was a whoosh as she hit send, the sound of her message taking flight. It went winging across the oceans. The years fell away. Distance was nothing and she was having a great time, enjoying the renewal of the old romance.

*

While at law school in Sydney, I worked for Margot for several years. Kel, a high school friend, got me the job. The interview took five minutes. Margot said, ‘Can you come Sunday? Eleven am sharp.’

She was a generous employer. On quiet days, she sent me home on full pay to study. On busy days when we did well, she slipped me extra money, tucking banknotes in my clothes like I was a stripper. She smuggled bread and avocados into my bag, and the pages of my books suffered more than one green smear before I learned to do a search at the end of every shift.

Margot despaired for Kel, who was an art school graduate. She sold as much as she could paint, but squandered her talent and made bad choices in men. ‘You’ve got to be serious,’ Margot told her, shaking her head. ‘You can’t sleep with just anyone.’

‘Didn’t you?’ Kel asked.

‘Darling, I won’t deny it. But that was in the Sixties. It isn’t the Sixties now. Do as I say, not as I do.’

For me, the job meant the ease of money. I had an allowance from my parents which covered my rent, but nothing more. They had lived away from Sydney for so long, in different places, that they did not know what it cost to live in the city. I did not think to ask for more. I knew they were not swimming in money, plus I thought of myself as very self-sufficient. I had worked elsewhere as a waitress for half of what Margot paid. Earning more meant I could buy the shoes I needed and the books I didn’t. The job also meant a largesse of baked goods, baguettes, friands and cakes. My boyfriend at the time liked the cakes especially; he ate them as he read, dropping crumbs between the pages. As the sugar hit his bloodstream, he became more animated, looking up to read some passage out loud. He was a philosophy student, quite intense, with a widow’s peak. Kel called him ‘Dave’ instead of David, having picked that he would hate it. She claimed the guys I liked were interchangeable. I said the same about her tastes. She always went for artists who gave off a woodsman vibe, wearing old boots and flannel shirts to show their earthiness.

At the café, we ate lunch in the mid-afternoon, after the lunch crowd had thinned and before the afternoon teas and coffees. We heaped salad leaves in bowls (serving put us off rich foods) and Margot poured herself a tumbler of red wine mixed with water, a way of drinking she had picked up living in Nice. Now and again she spoke about her life, although her stories added up to something less than a full account. Her revelations were disjointed and often held a moral. She might describe, as an aside to some dietary theories, a summer she had spent eating frozen grapes by the pool ('I blew up like a balloon, you don't need that much fruit'). When she spoke of her one-time husband, it was with an undimmed fondness. They had lived as flower children, in keeping with the age. After meeting him in Sydney, she had followed him back to Nice. They lived in an apartment on the Boulevard Jean-Jaurès. 'The outside looked quite shit but we had a whole floor,' she said.

His family ran businesses in Auron, the Alpes-Maritimes ski town where she had her brush with Pompidou. They had a house in Vence near the famous Saint-Martin hotel. You could lie by the pool, she said, and watch the sheiks come in by helicopter. These were her everywhere years. 'We just floated,' she said. Going out to California, they stayed in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. 'We went for the drugs, darling. We were very much into mescaline.' Thinking of Joan Didion, I asked her what she wore. 'Oh, very little, very little. Swathes of ferns in the hair. Leaves.'

They went to Mexico City for the '68 Olympics. The next year, back in San Francisco, they watched the moon landing in a hotel room. Shortly afterward, they left the US when they were found out for working illegally. Back in Sydney for a time, they decided to get married. The ceremony was small. Margot wore a fluffy dress that she bought the day before, and Charles put a daisy through his lapel. From there they returned to Nice, lasting almost a year, but they were plagued by a cocktail of destructive forces,

all the usual things that went wrong for flower children. Charles had his problems and the drug use didn't help. Margot did not blame him. She blamed the cold weather that winter. She hated Auron, she said. She hated it so much she used to go back to Nice on the bus alone. When a telegram came to say her father had passed away, she flew back for the funeral, and that was it for things with Charles.

Speaking of that time, she did not bring up her pregnancy. The baby had lived to term but it didn't come out well. Something had happened to it, though no-one could say what. It could happen, she knew that now. It was one of those things. At least she had seen him briefly: a silent waxy creature, not pink like he should have been. She had given birth to him in a ward under a Jesus picture. It was Jesus on the cross, a scarecrow of a man. When a nurse asked them if they wished to speak to a nun, Charles scowled and said no, because according to the church their baby would go to Limbo.

She told me this in speaking not of Charles but of her mother. She described her as 'sharp as paint', severe and unforgiving. She didn't mean to be that way, she said. When Margot came back from France, they met at a restaurant, neutral ground. Her mother looked her over and told her, 'I have to say you look good.' Margot had not expected a compliment, and because she was caught off guard she said, all in a rush, 'Mother, I lost my baby.' Then she cried a little, and her mother looked on, pained. She couldn't help being stiff; she was not an expressive person, and after a time they asked for the bill.

*

The emails and texts carried on all that year. Their messages were short but dense with information. Each was gaining a sense of how the other lived. Margot learned that Charles still had the old apartment. His father had died the year before, and the wind-up

of the estate had allowed him to quit his job at Aeros Bassiel, where he had worked for some years as a glorified English teacher.

‘He used to have to teach them space talk in English,’ she said. ‘He taught the French and then the Russians and then the Chinese.’ Now a man of leisure, Charles wore polarised aviators, colourful rubber Crocs, and drill shorts that exposed his still-muscular calves. His baldness was pronounced, but at least he clipped his remaining hair, trimming it close at the back and sides. A good move, in her view. It saved him from looking like her idea of a pedophile.

In one email, she described her normal day. She rose at five am, watched the American news, and drank her first coffee as she dressed and did her face. She shopped at the markets and did her prep at the café. She would have Kel or me make her second or third coffee. At five, after packing up, she put on driving gloves to go home. Refusing dinner invitations, she stayed in to recharge. Usually she watched a nature documentary. She liked shows about animals, especially baby animals – an orphaned monkey in a zoo, a lion cub suckling from a pig. On Mondays, her days off, she refused to go anywhere. If the weather was warm, she lay ‘like a lizard’ by the pool at her building.

‘I bet he wants a photo,’ Kel said knowingly one day.

‘I’m not sexting him, you creep.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

She meant a normal photo. But Margot resisted. She didn’t like to be in photos. Charles was too much the gentleman to ask her for one, although he happily sent lots of photos of himself. In some, he wore his full-body suit and a bright red helmet. There were shots of the aircraft too, with its tricycle-style wheels and the fixed double wing angling upwards from the chassis. Like a glider, it was controlled by a lateral bar, he said. It was powered from the rear by a sizeable propeller.

I tried to take Margot's photo one day in April. I wasn't working at the café but had dropped in to see her; I had started to work part-time at a big commercial law firm, which meant fewer waitressing shifts. Working in a skyscraper with blinding harbour views, I wasn't far from the café as the crow flew, although to get there I had to walk up a steep hill and then through a concrete subway that sheltered a camp of homeless people. As near as it was, the firm was a different world. Rivers of money ran. There was a private equity boom, which meant buyouts and spinoffs. In the corporate group, people high-fived whenever deals were struck. The firms were competing with each other for the best graduates, courting them with lunches and cocktail parties. I heard a law student at one function admire a female partner's shoes. 'Let's swap,' the woman told her, not missing a beat. 'You look like a six, six and a half?' And she swapped her expensive heels for the student's cheaper ones.

Kel was still working at the café. Seeing me losing the argument about taking Margot's photo, she complained, 'She won't even let me paint her portrait for my show.'

'I will! I said I would. Get my diary. Choose a date.' Still, there was no budging on the photo for Charles. 'Don't make me wild,' she said. An edge came into her voice, and if I hadn't given up I believe she would have hit me.

Photo or not, Charles showed no signs of cooling. He had a lot of time on his hands, his girlfriend Irina having left him a year ago, moving to Lyon to be near her two sons. With all his flying hours, he had already qualified for a limited licence, but he wanted one that would let him fly further from his home field. A full licence would mean he could fly with a passenger, he hinted.

I could see she was drawn, but this wasn't the first time. It turned out that Charles had made overtures before. In 1993, he had invited her to visit. At that time single again – things had finished with Erik – she had packed and made the trip in the European

summer. The story of this trip had a madcap flavour. She had had a stopover in Rome and narrowly escaped a bombing, one of several in the wake of new anti-Mafia laws. The blasts meant security and delays at the airport, and she passed this time shopping and drinking at the bar. On finally making it to Nice, she got off the plane drunk. She had shopping bags up her arms and must have looked absurd. She had told Charles not to come to meet her, but when she passed through the doors she saw him standing on the tiles. He had dressed for the occasion in a suit and a Hawaiian shirt. Bald on top, he had tufts of hair at the sides like koala ears. On seeing each other, they both started to laugh, and they laughed until tears streamed from their eyes.

This was how they began, but soon the wheels fell off. Charles had a girlfriend, about whom he had kept quiet. (To be fair, he had never lied; she had not asked him outright.) The girlfriend showed up to find him, a pretty but fading blonde. She looked dusty and displeased, having walked from the bus stop in impractically strappy sandals. She found them at the car about to go for a drive. When she demanded an explanation, Charles rounded on her in anger.

‘Get in the car,’ he snapped. She did as she was told and opened the front passenger door. ‘No,’ he said. ‘In the back. Margot is my *wife*.’

Margot did not regret the trip. She had a good time, she said. In her mind the story stood for the comedy of life; for that moment of amusement when she and Charles had locked eyes and laughed at each other’s middle-aged selves.

*

Margot was not my family. I had a family already. I saw my parents when their travels brought them near or through Sydney. My dad had a sailboat, a twenty-one footer

that he towed on a trailer to sail in different places. People think of sailing as the purview of the rich, but Dad went sailing like other people go camping, taking his food in an Esky full of melting ice and tooling around for days or weeks on some lake or stretch of coast. No marinas, no moorings, no popped collars in sight.

When my parents were sailing on Lake Macquarie, I headed up to see them, taking public transport and finding them at a jetty. Having come in from the wilds, they had pulled up at the village of Wangi Wangi, right below the neon lights of the RSL club. They used the bathrooms to bathe and drank wine as the sun set, and my dad looked forward to having dinner at the Chinese restaurant. They were enjoying themselves, but I found myself impatient. I had spent a lot of time on boats, long holidays adrift with no way to escape, reading on deck until I got sunstroke. This time I had brought Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*. I was amused by the part where Levin deals with the auditors; it could have been lifted straight from the Enron scandal. I tore through the book. Tolstoy was a genius. Who knew?

After a day's sailing, however, I was glad to get my train. I was always relieved to get back to the city, as relieved as my parents were to get out of it. They were more and more averse to dealing with the traffic, and if they had to drive through it Dad planned his route on fold-out maps, preparing as if for a polar expedition.

I lived in a series of sharehouses under the flight path. Stanmore, Leichhardt, Marrickville: neighbourhoods of the inner west. Marrickville was where Margot had once lived. I was down at the other end, in what used to be called the warren, because some settler landowner had brought rabbits out from England thinking they would make a good food source for the poor. When I lived there, Marrickville had excellent food; it was a predominantly Greek and Vietnamese suburb. Old Greek men and women felt free to berate me on the bus. When I bought flowers (long knobbly sticks budding with plum

blossoms), I wondered aloud how I would carry them home. ‘Where’s your husband?’ the man asked.

‘I don’t have one,’ I said.

‘Get one,’ he shot back.

‘What, today? This afternoon?’

When I told this story over lunch with my family, Dad responded by asking what the florist’s background was. ‘You don’t know with these people, men in his position.’

‘What do you mean? In what position?’

‘Men in positions of flower,’ my sister quipped.

For a short time I dated a guy who lived nearby. He was a part-time model and a DJ and a hair stylist as well, although he preferred to say he was a ‘hair-doing guy’. He was so committed to his look that when an iced tea company asked him to shave off his beard to play a monk in a commercial, he said no. He had very smooth skin and smelt like tobacco. Not a sad, stale cigarette smell, but the much nicer smell of actual tobacco leaves. We did not have much in common, but sometimes he came around after playing a set somewhere, and it was convenient for us both because he lived a few streets away. Once I saw a photo of his previous girlfriend on a beach, and he became self-conscious about it and said, ‘I gave her that haircut. It made her look like a troll.’ She did look a little bit like a troll – it was a layered, spiky haircut, very Eighties rocker – but something in his voice told me he still loved her, and later I heard they were back together.

At the firm where I worked, I wasn’t drawn to the other clerks. They had new suits, shiny hair and the glow of shared good fortune. When they met, they quizzed each other to find out who they knew in common, then ended by exclaiming, ‘It’s such a small world!’ As for the lawyers, the best of them were joyless, too tired and overworked to show much interest or spark. I shared this opinion with another clerk on my floor, before

adding offhandedly, 'I guess if I had to be stuck in an elevator with any of them, it would be Chris from litigation.' I was mildly embarrassed when she started seeing Chris; two years later, when they got married, they sent me an invite.

I started seeing another David, David the Second. He wasn't uptight like the first; he was happy to go by Dave. Insisted on it, in fact. We met at a party where everyone adored him. He was a few years older and drank peaty scotch whiskey. He was smart and funny and raffish-looking, and I had been waiting for someone who was smart and funny and raffish-looking. He loved that I had read Norman Mailer, because it gave him an opening to talk about war novels and boxing. There was an incongruity to his attraction to boxing; he couldn't have looked less like a boxer if he'd tried. He was tall and bow-legged with unkempt hair, and when he sprawled on a bed or swam in the ocean or a pool his limbs splayed akimbo like those of a frog. He had a natural enthusiasm; he liked an escapade. One night, we climbed over the high fence into the Botanic Gardens, whispering and laughing, and fooled around on the grass until we gave up because of the bugs.

Dave worked as a speechwriter for the Premier, and he made it sound like he was writing Lincolnesque speeches rather than editing remarks on a train station expansion. He meant to be a writer, and he lived much like I did, with a mattress and a desk surrounded by piles of books, although he also had a nicer room in his parents' house over the bridge. He was less inclined to schlepp out to the inner west, so I was always going from place to place with my stuff stashed in a bag. He came to the café, though. He met Margot. He *loved* Margot. She's brilliant, he said. She took to him as well, but she did not know about his drinking, which was partly what gave him that glittering quality he had.

I couldn't keep up with him. Not really. I tried for a time, but at some point I had figured out that marks actually mattered. They mattered not just for getting jobs but for scholarships overseas, and a lecturer pointed out that I should be thinking about these things. So I knuckled down. I studied. My essays bristled with footnotes. At the firm, I racked up billable hours and trawled through rooms full of binders. I wrote *pro bono* briefs. I was mentored by a senior lawyer over shots of wheatgrass juice.

I was serious at work. One day, another clerk tried to high-five me on the street. We were standing on George Street, about to cross the road. With his palm in the air, he said, 'Come on, don't leave me hanging!' But that was exactly what I did.

'I'm not going to high-five you. It's my policy,' I said.

*

In winter, something happened. Charles's emails to Margot stopped. The last thing he had written was innocuous on its face: 'Hot day.' (It was summer there.) 'I bought socks & an ice cream.'

This gave Margot no clues. Had he flown off in his microlight and, like Icarus, gone too far? Margot nudged him: *miss ur updates! don't be a stranger*. But neither this nor other promptings drew any response. The silence dragged on, and Margot became short-tempered and rude. She had always hated providing tap water to her diners; she had a bitchy way of saying 'the *lovely* tap water.' Now, though, she went so far as to insist that one family drink all the water they had poured. She blocked their departure until they laughingly complied. 'We're in a drought, you know,' she told them, hand on hip. It wasn't true, but as city people they did not know or care, and they went away saying what a character she was.

It was June, and Kel's solo show was a month away. Faced with the idea of sitting for a portrait, Margot blew hot and cold. She wanted to help Kel and thought highly of her paintings, but sitting still to be scrutinised was her idea of hell. She said, 'Who's going to want to look at an old wrinkled thing like me?' Her trump card was the cold; she couldn't sit in the freezing garage Kel used as a studio; she held up her blotchy hands and claimed poor circulation. In the end I filled in for her, sitting on a chair in front of a space heater. I've since read that painters, like boxers, see more than other people; instead of relying on the brain to fill in visual gaps, they train themselves to see what is actually before them. I can believe it after seeing Kel's face when she was painting. The gaze she turned on me was coolly appraising; it was a gaze of pure seeing, stripped of any judgement, and seeing it I knew why Margot stayed away. She had a secretive streak. She didn't trust anyone completely. Skilled at deflection, she hid her private self from view.

The truth was she was embarrassed about Charles' silence. She was mortified, dismayed. Her temper was getting worse. It was Kel who bore the brunt. When she dropped and broke a cup, one of Erik's pieces, Margot said, 'Stupid! You're so stupid!' She was rude to the building owner when he ordered a decaf. 'It's the worst for you, the worst,' she said with surprising force. 'You know the chemicals they use to strip the caffeine out?' She always regretted her sharp comments. She wished she could take them back. She renewed the offer she'd made to Kel to sit for a portrait, except that now there wasn't time, the works were already being hung. All that was left to her was go to the private view and discreetly buy one of the paintings. To Kel, she said, 'Next show, I promise. Why am I such a wretch?'

In trying to get her to send a photo to Charles, what we didn't know was that she had sent one already, attaching it to an email before the Great Silence. It was a perfectly nice photo, showing her standing by the counter. Not too close, she had told the woman,

a customer who took it for her. Her dark hair was pulled back and her lips had a coral shine.

This was why she was upset. He hadn't written back. She was carrying on regardless, as this was what she always did. It was what she had done after their marriage, finding happiness with Erik. He'd been older, at forty-one, and separated too. He owned a shop at Australia Square that sold souvenir ceramics. They met when Margot, a new hire, noticed him hanging around. 'Excuse me, sir,' she said. 'I see you here but you never buy. Are you a spy or what?' It was funny that she said this, because in fact he had once engaged in a little light espionage. He was a Czech, and as a young man he had passed information on the communists to British Intelligence. That was until the day he walked into a restaurant and saw his face among others on a wanted poster. He got out of the country, leaving everything behind, and wound up in Sydney, where he had to start again.

So Erik became the story of the Seventies. They lived next to his pottery among the factories of Marrickville, a suburb that was still mostly industrial. Grit carried on the air from the trucks of Illawarra Road, but they had a swimming pool and two excitable Rottweilers. The business was successful. They wanted for nothing. Once, when the window of Erik's car jammed on the drive to Melbourne, he pulled in at Albury and bought a new car off the lot, leaving the old one by the kerb in front of the dealership.

She said a good thing could be good even if it ended. She parted from Erik when he met somebody else. Later, much later, he asked her to come back. By this time he was suffering from early-onset Alzheimer's. She didn't go back but she helped him as best she could. When she went to the house, the Rottweilers heard her car coming down past Newtown Station, and they would prick up their ears and whine excitedly. Sometimes Erik, getting confused, walked to see her at the café, turning up in his dressing gown and enjoying the looks he drew from patrons. 'I walked from Marrickville,' he would say.

That had been long ago, and Margot had lived alone for years. She had a flat at Rushcutter's Bay, a rented studio apartment. The boxiness of her main room might have been depressing if it weren't for the water view and the extreme simplicity of her style. This meant the banishing of clutter, the re-gifting of gifts, and a hardline approach to dealing with mementoes. She showed the same ruthlessness about Charles' correspondence. She claimed to have lost interest. She couldn't write emails all day.

'Some people have to work,' she said, setting out canapés. This was on a rainy evening at a catering job. She had called to ask my help; someone else had called in sick. When I arrived in my suit she said, 'You're great to me, Rowan. I know you don't need to do this.' It wasn't her night: the job was an office party and she was cross with herself for having quoted too low. There were more people than there were meant to be. They fell over the trays of food. 'Like vultures!' she said. She was too proud to do what other caterers would have done, which was to serve cheaper food, fried things from the freezer. She tried to level the score instead by stealing what she could get her hands on in the office kitchenette. Taking handfuls of the popsicle sticks that were meant to be used as coffee stirrers, she shoved them down her pants.

'I'll use them to do my waxing,' she said defiantly. She didn't care who saw as she left with her serving trays and those popsicle sticks falling out of her trousers.

*

An email finally came from Charles. All was explained. He hadn't gone cold on their correspondence. First he had locked himself out of his phone, having confused his code with his bank card pin. Then he'd had his eyes lasered to correct his vision, and afterward a troublesome infection had made it hard to look at a screen.

He wrote: *At last I am better. I am writing this without glasses. I am an entirely new man!* He loved the photo she had sent him. *Just wonderful to see you,* he wrote. <3 <3 <3. He remarked on the café, saying how charming it was and how much he would like to see it.

This was in July, mid-winter. It was the right time to buoy her spirits. In the south of France, where it was summer, Charles flew his microlight over fields and towns, beaches and rocky coves. His messages arrived like warm drifts of air. They carried Margot through the bleak days, bearing her along through the wind-tunnels of the city and keeping her company at night when she went home to her flat. The emails flew back and forth; goings-on were swapped; they spoke about music, cinema and books. The romance was back on, there had been nothing to fear, and all was well again in the garden of their affections.

‘He’s invited her to go over,’ Kel said, sipping her drink.

‘What? Is she going to go?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think she knows.’ Kel was squinting at a painting that she had propped against the wall, and now, looking unhappy, she turned it the other way. At her studio in Redfern, we sat drinking and talking, sharing a longneck beer that she had poured into two glasses.

Margot hadn’t said yes to Charles, but she hadn’t refused either. He had argued his case, describing the scenic flights they would take together, particular routes he liked at certain times of day. Kel said she could picture the two of them going flying, both in old-timey goggles and hats with furry flaps. Margot would dress like Katharine Hepburn in the film *Christopher Strong*, except that she wouldn’t have Hepburn’s height, and hopefully she wouldn’t fly to her death.

‘Does he want to get back with her?’ I asked.

‘Who even knows? I don’t care. She’s always at me. I’m sick of it.’

Something was up with Kel. She had started doing collage using old books and magazines, and when we flicked through the old magazines to read our horoscopes, she made it clear she only wanted the good bits. She said, ‘Doom is for losers. Make it up if you have to.’ Then she neutrally detailed how her last fling had ended. The worst thing, she said, was that she kept seeing her ex, who had a studio next to hers. She said, ‘I cry every day but it’s getting better. I get it over with quicker. It doesn’t take me as long to stop, and then I’m like, tick, that’s done, what’s next?’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t know.’

‘Well, how could you know? Anyway, tell me. How is David?’

‘Dave,’ I said.

‘Dave.’ She was sceptical like always. She still maintained she could pick my type. ‘Oh, is your name Dave?’ she enquired with mock-politeness. ‘Are you tall, pasty-looking and really pretentious?’

I could play that game as well. ‘Oh, are you a shaggy-haired artist or musician?’ I asked. ‘Do you like to go out with girls who are way too hot for you, but also like to make them feel like they’re not good enough? Because you’d be perfect for my friend.’

Actually, I admitted, things weren’t perfect with Dave. We had fought on the phone late the night before. We were arguing a lot. He said I wasn’t any fun. That was probably true, but it was also true that he was drinking too much, staying out every night and getting recklessly messy while priding himself on his talent for hard living.

Kel said she spent most of her time alone, the exception being when she served customers at the café. She was spending her nights reading *Infinite Jest*, David Foster-Wallace’s doorstopper of a novel, which she acknowledged was maybe not ideal breakup reading. ‘I basically read fiction to learn about life,’ she said.

‘Okay, but was David Foster-Wallace all that good at life?’

It wasn’t long before that Wallace had hanged himself.

To me books had ceased to seem like any sort of guide. I had arrived at the view that no-one told the truth about love, that as a culture we peddled an assortment of wrong ideas. In particular, I had no idea how much to reasonably expect – how much any relationship, once it had been worn in, could deliver on the cliché of a romantic state.

‘Don’t you have to go?’ Kel asked. ‘It’s almost six o’clock.’

‘Is it?’

I was having dinner with Margot, and Margot being Margot we had agreed on an early time. I hurried to Darlington and the café she had chosen. She showed up walking her gliding walk, and we sat facing the street to eat the house spaghetti. She was in high spirits, excited and nervous. She spoke of Charles and his microlight, shuddering with pleasure. ‘I’d be afraid of falling out. The whole thing is ridiculous.’ Gazing at the pedestrians, she asked, ‘But what do I have to lose? Do I want to make other peoples’ lunches into my old age? Although, you know, Rowan, I worry. What if it’s how it was with Erik? What if he wants a nurse?’

She had looked into it anyway; she had seen her travel agent. She had a quote on a ticket from Sydney to Paris, stopping over in Ho Chi Minh City. On the topic of Vietnam, she said, shaking her head, ‘You know, if I’d been a man, I might have had to go off to fight. They had that lottery for the war. My name could have come up.’ She told me Charles had fought in Algeria. This was before she knew him. On night watch, he had been made to sit holding a grenade with the pin pulled out. If he had fallen asleep and dropped it, it would have gone off and killed him. It was torture, she said, shaking her head. She guessed it had played a part in his problems later on.

For a moment, she looked quite aged, her eyeliner smudged off-course, her skin crêpey under her tan. But her smile was valiant, her eyes peculiarly bright. She downed a glass of water, the *lovely tap water*. Changing the topic, she asked me how I'd been. 'You're doing well, though, aren't you, Rowan?' She peered into my face.

'I'm doing great,' I said.

She was too preoccupied to dig about further in my life. Yet there was something I had been wanting to ask her at dinner. Feeling certain of nothing and with no trustworthy guides, I wanted the opinion of a realist. As we were leaving I came out with it on the street, asking her whether she thought I should go on with Dave.

'Is he good to you?' she asked me, frowning with sudden concentration.

'Yes.'

'How is the sex?'

I was surprised. 'The sex is good.'

'Good,' she said. She flagged a taxi. 'You're fine. Stick with him, Rowan.' And with these words of wisdom she stepped into the street.

*

Do as I say, not as I do. That was how it was with Margot. She wanted good things for us; she wanted us to be happy and successful and secure. This was what she wanted in return for what she gave me, and it was what she hoped to see whenever she peered into my face. At times this made it harder to go back to see her. It wasn't just that I was busy, occupied with other things. It was the effort of looking good. If I hadn't done my hair I knew she would worry about me; she would think I wasn't doing well. So, not wanting her to worry, I stayed away from the café.

In May, as she flew out, I was breaking things off with Dave. I had contradictory feelings. Desolation. Annoyance. I was more attached to him than I thought. It was all that dash and glitter. He raged and was petulant, and even then, at his most caustic, he had a way with a turn of phrase. Afterwards I was lonely, but I found an answering desolation in the onset of winter: the trees shedding their leaves and standing bare against the sky, the crystalline light when the sun shone, things stripped to their essentials.

As for Margot, she landed in Ho Chi Minh City. In the airport she moved among her fellow baby boomers. There were a lot of Americans, a lot of Vietnam veterans, holding paperback histories like guidebooks to the past. They were large and slow-moving, shuffling in their sandals and looking uncertainly about, and she ducked and wove between them, boarding pass in hand. She had not gone to any war, had never picked up a gun. As it was, she had bounced about without much consequence. It suited her to be the little person in history. She lived in the long stream of the present; events and memories recurred; the past was always with her. Maybe this was why she didn't need to search it out.

That night, she slept for an age in an airport hotel. The next day, she transferred to a resort town in the north. She did not go to France, did not rekindle things with Charles.

Don't think badly of me pls, she wrote in an email. *Whoosh*. One more for old times' sake! He would read it over breakfast with his perfect lasered vision. His face was still dear to her, still tenderly familiar. Reclining by the pool, she pictured taking the flight he had planned: the two of them in red helmets like a double-headed insect, taking off from the small airfield of Fayence-Tourrettes, wafting over the orange roofs and all the patchwork fields, holding on for dear life and enjoying the joyride.

8. Day Zero

Sebastian was still dozing when Teena came back from her run. Hearing her come in and put the coffee machine on, he sat up in bed, checked his watch and rubbed his face.

‘You should’ve come.’ She looked in. ‘It’s a beautiful day. No dust.’

It had been quiet in the apartment and he had overslept. His phone had hardly rung all week; everyone thought he had gone to District 6-13. His packed bag sat on the floor, ready to go. On top sat his press pass and a box of respirator masks. Moving to pick up the box, he turned it over unhappily. He always took the masks on assignments to the outer settlements, but this time he’d had to cancel his trip at the last minute.

‘You didn’t sleep well?’ called Teena. In the other room, she was opening a window and throwing her running suit over the sill to air.

Sebastian didn’t answer, pretending he hadn’t heard. In fact, he had lain awake between the hours of three and five am. He had occupied himself in this time by mentally plotting his funeral, which had become his favourite pastime during his recent sleepless nights. By now he had considered all aspects of the event, giving it the same lavish attention that some people gave to their weddings. He had thought a lot about the music and, crucially, the venue. He didn’t want it to be a church. (He had nothing against Christians.) He didn’t want it to be the meditation pavilion next to the school. (He had nothing against Buddhists or mindfulness meditators.) It could be a function room at the convention centre, although that would lack ambience and possibly feel flat.

There was a loud thwacking sound, then another soon afterward, which meant that Teena had seen a cockroach. ‘You little fucker,’ he heard her say, and her satisfied tone

suggested she'd made a kill. She came back into the bedroom to see him holding the box of masks.

‘What’ll we do with these?’ he asked, looking up.

‘Wear them to have sex?’ Sweaty from her run, she tipped her head and grinned. Having taken off her suit, she wore briefs and a sports bra. Sinewy muscles stood out on her abdomen and thighs.

‘No. Maybe. No.’ He smiled distractedly then frowned. He did not want to be cheered up. Moving to get dressed, he paused long enough to let Teena take a look at the nape of his neck. This was where the shrapnel had gone in three weeks before, during his last trip to the outer districts. It wasn’t a big deal – he had been secretly pleased about it – and he was due to have it cut out in a few days’ time. A scan had showed the offending sliver, which had lodged a half-inch in, an innocuous stroke of black amid the grey of surrounding tissue. But this was not all the scan had shown; there was something else as well, a different and larger mass, the thought of which had been keeping him up at night.

‘Some training exercise,’ said Teena, shaking her head as she gently pressed the spot.

‘Well, not everyone can be as competent as you.’ He was proud of his girlfriend. Raised by her grandmother in Queens, she had risen through the ranks after joining Special Forces. She now worked at a desk job, handling logistics.

‘Lucky, though,’ she added. ‘It meant you got that scan.’

‘I’ve got to go,’ he said, because it was already past eleven. Teena threw him a look, then went to take a shower. He left the apartment before she emerged again, and crossed the dusty street to hail a bus from the other side. Teena was right: the sky was clear and unpolluted, a soft sage green that rose to a deep olive tone.

On the bus, his phone rang. It was his dad, calling from Illinois, but as soon as he picked up the call dropped out. He wasn't the only one with a bad signal; he heard a girl behind him say, 'I've only got two bars. Make that zero bars. You'd think we were on Pluto.'

It was something of a relief not to have to talk. Settling back in his seat, he went back to his thoughts of the early hours, considering again how he would like to be sent off. He knew there was an irony – even a hypocrisy – in planning his funeral in his head. Hadn't he often mocked the elaborate preparation that went into his friends' weddings? He had always seen such efforts as stupid and exhausting. Of course, he had played his part when required. He had shuttled to the nearest moon for a buck's weekend, cramming in with the other guys in a rank-smelling cabin. He had been to nuptials in the desert where the guests were made to wear retro bubble helmets, and to a town hall service where the groomsmen were kitted out by the last living Neapolitan tailor (the suits would never be worn again, thanks to a quirky choice of fabric). He had heard the works of Bach played on ruined cellos, the strings of which were brittle from the dry air of the steppes, and a performance by one musician who was also the bride's ex-boyfriend, because he had really taken off and no hard feelings, right?

It was a sort of advertising, a conscientious display of individuality that was in truth (he'd been heard to say) 'the logical extension of late capitalism.' But he now found himself indulging the same dubious impulse, enjoying the curation of his ideal funeral. He had been jotting his ideas in a moleskin notebook, eclectic song lists that consisted of a mix of high and low, classical and pop. In the hours when he had the apartment to himself, he listened to the tracks that he had put on his longlist, assessing how best to evoke a sense of his being. This was a hard thing to pull off in the space of forty minutes, but he relished the task, treating it like an aesthetic puzzle.

He also thought, conversely, of how the event might go if he didn't leave instructions – the awfulness of someone playing some really crappy music, and the highly possible disaster of a badly-chosen reading. He knew it wasn't a good idea to try to talk about this with Teena, even though he would have liked to rule a few things out up front, like R&B ballads and anything Biblical. He figured the best thing would be to write out his ideas, to make a final list and tuck it safely in a drawer, his last will and testament regarding the event.

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It was then that his phone rang, breaking into his thoughts. He answered it thinking it was his dad again. Instead, the voice at the other end was that of his friend Dino.

'Hey, Seb, what's happening? Want to stop by the studio?' Dino was an artist. He painted the sand dunes, cliffs and caves beyond the settlement's limits, churning out proficient landscapes that were increasingly popular.

'Can't today, Dino. Work is insanely busy.'

'Yeah, I hear you, buddy. I'm painting like crazy. I've got this retrospective happening on Day Zero.'

'A retrospective?' Sebastian blinked. He had been looking out the window, ready to tune out, but now he found himself feeling jealous of this mark of acclaim. He was trying not to think about the state of his own career. He had always been confident of some eventual success, perhaps a stunning exposé that would spark controversy and debate. He had pictured the future as being ripe with promise, or rather with a thousand different promises. It was a far-off inviting land, suggestive of a gorgeous superfluity. Now, though, it was as if his horizons were closing in. That distant shore was hurtling close, way before he was ready.

‘Aren’t you too young to have a retrospective?’ He pictured his scruffy friend, who went everywhere in scuffed Converse high-tops, cords and a zip-up hoodie. He had an old car-accident scar across the bridge of his beakish nose, giving him the look of an outsized wounded bird. Dino was not yet forty – although he was old enough, as Sebastian now reflected, to be the father of a teenager, a boy who had only lately gotten in touch. It was bizarre to think that Dino had had a son all this time, a kid – his own flesh and blood – walking around New Province. ‘Who decided it was time to give you a retrospective?’

‘Well, it’s really a survey show. That’s what they call it if you’re not dead. And I’ve been around the traps for a while now, you know.’

‘Yeah, but doing what? Picking up art school students?’

Dino was unabashed. ‘I’m working on a few things.’

Sebastian frowned and said, ‘Wait. You’re making new work for the show? Day Zero is next week.’

‘I’ve got to have something to put up. They’ve sent out the invites, made me sound like an A-grade dick. *An artist who has succeeded, much more than any other, in finding a fitting visual language for the New Province landscape.*’ He said the party was being hosted by the Co-Sec embassy. ‘Tell me you’ll come to the opening,’ he went on. ‘And I want to know what you think of this newer stuff I’ve been doing. I’ve been staring at it so long I don’t know if it’s good or what. They’re from these magnified slides of extremophiles.’

Sebastian shook his head. He couldn’t think about paintings, couldn’t go to the studio and stroke Dino’s ego. He couldn’t stomach the idea of the opening, either. The champagne flutes on trays, the speeches and grandstanding, the smokers huddling on a terrace like the last of a dying tribe. And he hated Day Zero, the way they all went on. They would talk of the beauty of the place, the spirit of exploration. No one would

mention the outer districts or the long, slow-burning conflict. Day Zero commemorated the settlement's founding. The planting of a flag, the pegging out of a biodome, the splashing of pictures over the internet to show other hopefuls that they had been too slow.

‘Sounds amazing, Dino.’ He squeezed his way off the bus. ‘Hey, I’m heading into a meeting. Call you later, yeah?’

This was gilding the lily. His meeting was really an appointment. Entering a low-rise glass building, he checked the directory in the lobby. He found the second-floor waiting room, which struck him as depressing, a wasteland of humanity. Its seats were occupied by the infirm and the diseased, a blotchy-skinned people with lashless staring eyes. As Sebastian waited to go in, the older guy sitting beside him turned to him to ask, ‘What got you, a solar flare?’ He was a skeletal-looking man with a protuberance on his cheek. He leaned close to Sebastian as if to let him in on a secret. ‘Have you tried the wild plum diet? I’ve got the cold-pressed juice on order.’

Sebastian hadn’t tried any diets, wild plum or otherwise. He wanted to recoil from the old man and his messed-up face. He was even more repelled by his over-familiar tone and the inference that they were in this together. With his cynical cast of mind, Sebastian hated – no, he abhorred – being forced into the role of a wide-eyed miracle-seeker. Everything inside him bucked against starting on a quest (onerous, all-consuming, time-sucking, never-ending) in search of some new and transformative alchemy.

He was saved from the conversation when his name was called, and he went in to meet Dr Dominic Seymour, who turned out to be a chatty if slightly manic person. The surgeon was slightly built, and wore long sleeves and a bad tie. An expensive bicycle leaned against his office wall under a row of certificates.

‘The young are the most deserving,’ he said, in an opening observation that encouraged Sebastian. ‘Well, they have the most to gain or lose.’ Scrolling through scan

cross-sections on a screen in front of him, he kept up a commentary that required little of his patient. ‘Do you have any symptoms? No? So you were just going along, shoulders back, and then this tripped you up. A splodge on a scan. It’s a weird thing, isn’t it, technology. Surreal. You wouldn’t otherwise have had any idea.’

Dr Seymour kept scrolling and scrolling. ‘You’re being very cool about it, cooler than I would be. It’s very courageous of you.’

Courageous. Sebastian stiffened, not liking where this was going.

‘Look, I won’t say it’s not operable. It’s eminently operable. It’s just a question of what that will achieve. You see, this is now recurrent cancer. Here and here, you see – ’ He pointed. To the left of the small black mark that represented the piece of shrapnel, Sebastian saw the offending splodge. ‘In the spinal cord. Which means you’re resistant to the drugs you took last time, and unless we can find something to stop the spread of microscopic disease, we are kidding ourselves. If you were seventy-one and not thirty-one, we wouldn’t even be talking about doing anything about it. We’d be saying the horse has bolted.’

‘Right,’ said Sebastian, reeling in his seat.

‘I have to take this to our panel,’ Dr Seymour said. ‘If I had my way, I’d operate. I mean, otherwise it’s just a self-fulfilling prophecy, isn’t it. I had this one patient, we decided we couldn’t go in, I always think that we failed him – ’ Here the surgeon began to ramble, and his gaze moved restlessly about the room, unable to settle, as he described how the patient died ‘a horrible painful death’ as a quadriplegic.

Sebastian listened, appalled. He didn’t want to hear a story about a man dying. He wanted to hate the surgeon for dumping it on him, but at the same time he was conscious of a sort of struggle taking place within the man across the desk, a compulsive inner battle the surgeon seemed to be losing. He’s breaking up, Sebastian thought. The guy is having

an episode. By the end of the consultation, Dr Seymour could not even look him in the eye. He averted his face as he shook hands and scurried off, so that Sebastian was reminded of old exorcism films in which the person who is possessed shrinks away from a priest.

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The first time Sebastian had had cancer, he had taken a course of pills. They were meant to clear it up and had appeared to do the trick; it was almost like taking antibiotics for a nasty flu. He had been diagnosed soon after his twenty-seventh birthday after suffering from headaches and severe vertigo. It was a primary brain tumour, malignant, in the cerebellum, which was the lower back part of his brain. He had cancelled a work trip that time as well. He had let everybody think he was away at the conflict zone when in reality he was sitting on his couch, smoking joints to relieve the nausea from the pills and enduring an acne rash that spread over his face and chest. The experience as a whole was like regressing to teenagedom – being grounded by his parents, getting stoned all day long.

After that, he'd had a scan showing that everything was fine. He had come to regard that day as his personal Day Zero, the first day in what would be his new calendar. That was two years ago, or four Gregorian years. He thought he had seen the back of the disease, and every so often, when he caught himself getting bored on a bus or at a checkpoint as he waited for some official to okay his credentials, he would draw himself up and think, 'That's right. I won. I fucking *won*.' He had once said this to Teena, to be met with the dry response, 'Well, you know, Sebastian, no one wins forever.' Which

wasn't an attempt to rain on his parade. She wasn't hating on his triumph; it was just her way to tell the truth.

This time around, he had known straight off it was different. Not because he felt sick. Weirdly, he felt fine. Nothing had changed and yet everything had changed. The recurrence meant he had hit Stage Four, which made things serious. Getting the news a week ago in a windowless doctor's office, he had sat there soberly, almost impassively. He had listened and nodded without asking a lot of questions. He didn't need to ask to know what the news meant: a slow or fast decline, with perhaps a stab at surgery, and the brute use of drugs with decreasing effectiveness. Actually, the news had broken his heart, a quiet event that he had kept to himself, not letting on even to Teena. He went about his days and found he could function fine. Maybe this was the difference between being twenty-one and thirty-one, knowing that he could live pretty well even with a broken heart.

As much as he thought about his funeral, he didn't actually want to die. He had briefly thought about suicide, but only as an abstract prospect. He had thought about the writer Hunter S. Thompson, who had shot himself in the head rather than see his health decline, and was then sent off with a cannon paid for by Johnny Depp. In Sebastian's estimation, this was a bit over the top. Plus, he would not want to do the deed unless it was really time. Even then, he was pretty sure he didn't have it in him; he didn't think he could end his life, when it came down to it. It comforted him that Teena would know what to do. This was another subject he hadn't raised with her yet. But he knew she would help him if the situation called for it. She would carry things off with her unfailing competence. He could trust her to kill him – painlessly, efficiently, undetectably.

For the moment, he took some satisfaction in the way he was keeping things together. He had the ability to live with uncertainty, something that (as he came to think)

set him apart from other people. After that first diagnosis, he had tried seeing a counsellor. It had seemed like the thing to do, plus it made him feel important, sitting on a couch like someone in a film. Ultimately, though, he couldn't get into it. He could never quite believe that talking *did* anything. Nor could he warm to the psychologist, a well-heeled looking woman with a thing for beige. She always wanted to circle back to his relationship. 'And how is your girlfriend faring?' she would ask, looking concerned, like she couldn't quite believe that Teena was not a teary mess.

'Teena? Teena's great,' he'd answer truthfully.

'Is she talking to anyone?'

'You mean as in counselling? About me?'

'About you or about her... experiences.'

'No. She's a trooper. In both senses, hah-hah.'

One thing that worried him this time was that people would find out. He worried that his phone would stop ringing and that no one would give him work. So far only Teena knew what was going on. They had always based their relationship on telling the truth, and more specifically on an absence of sentimentality. This was something on which they had come to pride themselves, although the problem then became one of how to show affection, how to make romantic gestures that were non-schmaltzy and authentic. The risk was of lapsing into a co-dependent indifference, living in close proximity like two neutral adjacent atoms, having no need to bond via the swapping of electrons. Luckily, this problem fell away during the night. This was when they spooned in bed (Sebastian liked to be the big spoon), or when he wriggled blindly across the wide cool sheet to find Teena where she lay at the other side, poised as if to roll off the edge of a continent.

When they found out about his new scan, she'd cried a little. He told her she should leave him, saying, 'I'm so sorry. I didn't want this for you.'

She shook her head and wiped her tears. She said, 'I already did my thinking.'

'What do you mean? When?'

'Last time around.'

'Oh.' He was surprised to hear this, and also a bit put out.

'As you can see, I am still here.'

'Yes,' he said, nodding, but he felt far from reassured. He tried to keep a childish note from creeping into his voice. 'Well, maybe it's time for you to think about it again.'

*

It took an hour to get to the desert, taking a series of unsealed roads. They suited up before the checkpoint, pulling on pliable moulded masks, snapping on ventilators, and getting back into the buggy. As they left the gravity field, Teena changed down through the gears. The sound system died when they lost connectivity, but Sebastian was happy to do without music. There was the sound of the throaty engine, the tires eating up the road, and the rushing of cold air at the reinforced windscreen.

He had rung Teena on getting out from seeing the surgeon that afternoon. 'Want to get out of town?' he'd asked. 'I'm sick of this joint.' Agreeing to the idea, she had come to pick him up. As they got going, she asked, 'Want to talk about it?'

'Later,' he replied. 'Did you bring my suit, the lighter one?'

'Yes.' She glanced at his feet. 'You wore those sneakers to see the doctor? I thought you were getting new ones.'

He looked down. On both feet, his little toes were pushing through the worn-out mesh, showing the grey fabric of his socks. 'I'm making these last.'

'Last until what?' Teena made a face as she drove. 'Just buy new sneakers, will you?'

The day was getting on; soon it would be dusk, and the temperature was dropping. They reached a smallish shallow crater rimmed by rocky cliffs and entered through a narrow pass between eroding tiers of stone. There was an isolated hut, a basic can-shaped structure with a stand-alone latrine. Campers weren't supposed to use it – it was there for work crews to use – but Dino had coaxed the keypad code out of someone he knew. He made it his base for his sketching excursions, making forays into the cliffs and fossicking in the caves. The hut was an open secret among their group of friends; Sebastian and Teena used it to get away. They both felt lighter in the desert, and Teena especially craved the relief of low gravity when her bad leg gave her trouble.

On arriving, they threw their gear into the hut and, shutting the door as the aircon cranked up, pulled off their headgear to down a couple of cold beers. They looked out the window at the cliffs, which were popular with rock-climbers. 'That reminds me,' Teena said. 'I've got to ring Zoë. She's been wanting to go climbing.' Zoë was a friend from her time in Special Forces. She had sought to remake herself as an adventure tour operator, but in practice seemed to have a lot of time to burn. 'Well, another time. The cliffs aren't going anywhere.'

'No, they are not.' Sebastian went to take a leak. He was glad to have his mask because the latrine had not been cleaned. He would have thought that the work crews would be used to urinating in a low-gravity environment, but he could see on the stained wall where they had overshot. After escaping the cubicle, he found the magnesium sticks and kero and got the campfire going, coaxing the flame until it took and burned cheerfully. He squatted before it and looked across the shallow valley to the cliffs that were just then catching the last of the sun. People rhapsodised about the quality of light that was distinctive to New Province – the streakiness of the sky, the delicate colours, a golden haze that was in fact the sign of noxious gases. It was almost a religion, and sometimes

he thought there was something more at play in these protestations, something almost competitive, a need to definitively prove an attachment to the place. Still, there was something to it. He wasn't unaffected. He watched with a quiet awe as the sun sank and disappeared, its dying rays turning the sky an electric blue.

At this point, however, the quiet was rudely broken. A large RV pulled up and came to a shuddering stop a short distance from the hut. A generator churned into life, dubstep pumped from a loudspeaker, and spotlights burned through the dark to illuminate a swathe of ground. A half-dozen guys wearing technical fabric suits jogged down the vehicle's steps, fanned out in a V formation and, calling to each other, started doing frisbee drills. You've got to be kidding, Sebastian thought. As one of them waved at him, he smiled back politely even though he wore a mask and actually felt like crying.

'We've got company,' he told Teena, going back inside the hut. Having passed through the airlock, he pulled his headgear off.

'I saw,' she said wryly. She was warming soup on the burner. They sat on the lower bunk to wait for it for to be ready. 'It doesn't bother you, the shrapnel?' she asked when he adjusted his position, rolling a sweater to put behind his back.

'No.'

'You're a better man than me.'

'That has never been true, except biologically speaking.'

'Hah.' She zipped her suit open from the ankle to the thigh and took off her prosthesis. The rubber bands that secured it cut into her skin and she was always relieved to get it off. 'I'm still glad we came,' she said. 'I like it here. Although do you remember that time we came and that other couple was here as well, and the guy was going on about their dehydrated meals, how he made them all himself using a solar-powered oven?'

'Ugh. Don't remind me. I wanted to punch him in the face.'

‘And the way he talked over her, like, could you be more pompous?’ Picking up a sheaf of documents she had brought with her from work, she idly ran her gaze down some sort of supply list. Stopping at a line item for sanitary products, she looked up with a smirk and said, ‘You know, I read that early on, when NASA was going to put some woman astronaut in space, the engineers had to know the weight of everything, right, so they asked her how many tampons she would need for a week. They asked, would a hundred be enough?’ Lowering the page, she laughed. ‘A hundred! That’s so crazy. Dudes have no idea.’

‘Well, why should they?’ Sebastian asked. ‘I don’t know how many of those silicon cups you use.’

‘I just use the one and wash it.’

‘Right, but do you know how many times I shit a day?’

‘Well –’

‘Do you? How many?’

The soup was sputtering to a boil and Teena hopped up to switch it off. He knew not to offer to get it for her, but sat back and took his mug when she handed it to him. They lay back on the bunk to eat, resting on utility blankets that they had folded up like pillows and warming their hands on the mugs until the soup had cooled a little. At this point, Teena said, ‘Tell me what the surgeon said. Tell me what you’re thinking. You’ve been so distant, Sebastian.’

‘I’m always distant,’ he told her.

‘No, you’re a smart, engaging guy who cares about people.’

‘You’ve been consistently mistaken about my true nature.’ Finishing his soup and putting the mug aside, he massaged her leg where the rubber bands had left their red indentations. Outside, the music had cut out, and they could hear the frisbee players firing

up the RV to leave, their voices echoing as the sound bounced off the cliffs. Through the small square window he saw stars spattered across the black, and one of them seemed to pulse, although it was probably just a flaw in the thick glass.

‘Oh, and another thing, get this. Did you know that Dino is having a retrospective?’

‘Yeah? That’s fantastic. Be happy for him, won’t you?’

‘I am happy for him.’ A minute passed before he added, ‘Why wouldn’t I be happy?’

But there was no answer from Teena, who had fallen asleep. He pulled a blanket up to her chin, re-masked to go outside, and there, without anyone to object, used a wasteful amount of kindling in making the campfire blaze.

*

Several nights later, in bed, Sebastian had the idea of going to the conflict zone anyway. The thought came to him just before four-thirty am. It wasn’t as if Dr Seymour had settled on a plan. In the meantime, why shouldn’t he go? Why shouldn’t he jump on the next shuttle?

He went back to sleep thinking that this was a great idea, it was only a wonder he hadn’t thought of it before. But when he woke to the light of day, he remembered the rules of his insurance. No one was going to certify him as physically fit to go to District 6-13. How would that letter read? *To whom it may concern, Sebastian is about to get sliced up for his out-of-control cancer, but prior to that he is good to go. Yours faithfully, A. Doctor.*

He rose that day to go and see a different doctor, the neighbourhood all-rounder who would pull the shrapnel out of his neck. On his way there, he took a call from his father. Sebastian had called him the night before to break the news about his tumour. As he had expected, the call did not go well; his father had reacted with extreme bewilderment. Now, having taken the night to try to digest the information, he was calling

back with specific questions. He prefaced question number one with a convoluted story about a woman who, on getting sick while stationed in Antarctica, had managed to diagnose and cut out her own cancer by following instructions from specialists via Skype. He asked of Sebastian, 'Is that what you're going to have to do?'

'We have doctors here, dad. We have a hospital.'

'Was it the solar flare, do you think? It was a lot of radiation.'

'Was it the solar flare? How would I know, exactly? There's no label on the tumour. It's not like ordering a wine where you know the provenance.'

He ended the call as he fronted up to the clinic. He had been told to take some codeine before coming in, and that morning, after his coffee, he had dutifully popped some tablets and smoked a joint for good measure. The drugs were beginning to take effect as he lay face down in the small room, and then the doctor, a balding man in a Hawaiian shirt, gave him a jab of local anaesthetic. Sebastian felt no pain as the guy made an incision and went in with a pair of tweezers. He examined the posters on the wall, which were advertisements for Botox. Feeling lightheaded but cogent, he asked, 'That's something you recommend?'

'Oh, totally,' he was told. 'I inject myself with it, no problemo.' At this point, Sebastian turned his gaze to the TV screen, which was playing reruns of *Grand Designs: The Space Edition*. The episode showed a Silicon Valley billionaire creating a fortified bunker. 'The pièce de résistance?' the presenter said teasingly. 'The master bedroom is one big hyperbaric chamber.'

Before the big reveal, however, the doctor declared that he was finished. With a flourish, he handed over a clear specimen jar. The artefact visible inside it was disappointingly tiny, Sebastian couldn't help but feel – a dull sliver like the lead out of a drafting pencil.

He was still codeine-drunk when he got back on the bus. Checking his emails on his phone, he clicked on one that bummed him out. His editor said he was killing a piece that had been months in the making. It dealt with corruption in tenders for infrastructure contracts, and Sebastian had called in a lot of favours to wheedle out the details. As a freelancer, he hated having a story spiked; in a hierarchy of all his least favourite things to happen, he would rank this as worse than losing his bond on a rental place or finding a grey hair sprouting in his five-day growth. The irony with this particular piece was that it had grown longer with successive requests from his editor for more and more information, but now the guy wrote to say, *It turned out to have more of a feature feel than really made sense for us, and now that the facts are known we can't make it work as news.* Sebastian re-read the text of the email before tapping a reply, *Riiiiiiiiight*, and hitting send.

To hell with his editor. He had lost sight of the big picture. Yet as the bus rattled on, Sebastian's thoughts began to spiral. It might have been the drugs; he didn't think of this in the moment. He was yanked back to his great fear, the drum of his discontent. He had summoned the courage to let Teena know how he felt, saying the night before in bed, 'I feel like I haven't done enough. And what if I never do enough?' Her response had done nothing to allay his fear. In fact, she had laughed at him. 'You always feel that way,' she had said, rolling onto her side. 'So the world is as it should be. Everything is in its place in the universe.'

The real unfairness, he thought, was that he might turn out to be a failure just by running out of time. If he died anytime soon, he wouldn't just fail in his work, but in an even more basic way; he would fail as an organism. There was nothing more essential to succeeding in life than managing to stay alive. His next, unbidden thought, however, was that this might not be strictly true. His memory of high-school biology was admittedly pretty hazy, but he knew that some creatures had evolved to die as they procreated –

certain spiders, perhaps? And didn't bees kill themselves when they stung? Which would mean they could realise their Darwinian destiny even as they died, so long as they went out having sex or by spiking someone's butt.

He hit the stop button with some force. The bus was nearing his destination. He had to go directly to his second appointment for the day, this one with some kind of radiologist. It was on Dr Seymour's say-so, to get more pictures of the blob. Sebastian had scheduled things back-to-back to get them over with, and as he arrived at the clinic he felt pleased about how efficient he was being. The radiologist wore jeans and had too much product in his hair. He led Sebastian to a lair-like room that was suffused with the bluish light of several computer screens. Sebastian felt a bit weird about letting the guy run a lubricated instrument up and down his neck, but his interest was piqued when the computer next to them started emitting sounds. He heard hissing and whooshing then something like white noise. 'That's what it sounds like in there?' he asked, amazed, as they listened together.

'Yes – or that's how the software interprets it.'

'It sounds like space.' It was a strangely expansive soundscape; he thought of machines raking the galaxies for high and low frequencies, for the faintest disturbance, for the resonances of dust. He thought of the task of these machines as akin to a kind of yearning and therefore as somehow poignant. They were the programmed expression of the human ache to hear something – anything – in a sprawling inhuman cosmos. And as he sat there listening, a boyhood memory came to him: his first time in space. He was struck by the sights and sounds, a sense of limitlessness. Liftoff, a funnelling darkness, space junk spinning close. Another boy, clammy and frightened, urinating in his clothes. They were on a school excursion; Sebastian was embarrassed that his parents had not paid for him to do the extra activities. He pretended he didn't want to hike across a crater

or go to a toboggan park. Instead, he fooled around in the dust, flapped his arms to make an angel indentation, looked up and scanned the skies with his portable transmitter. What he heard, to his surprise, was not the chattering of aliens, not an aria or concerto played by an orchestra, but a courier somewhere going about his work and humming to himself, something that might or might not have been David Bowie.

Tears sprang to his eyes as this memory came to him. He was still easily embarrassed and his embarrassment made him brusque. 'I have something in my eye,' he said to the radiologist. 'You should know I took drugs this morning. Also, you see that sticking plaster? That is where I was shot.'

'All good.' The guy backed away. 'I'll give you the room.'

*

The next time Dino rang, he spoke about himself again. He hadn't noticed that Sebastian had not rung him back last time. He rambled on about his paintings and a new girl he was seeing – 'brunette and kind of hot, but in this compelling ugly way, with a fuck-off nose and forehead.' He spoke of his opening, which was almost upon him. He said confidently, 'Also my son is coming. I feel like it might be weird.'

Sebastian's preoccupations fell away when he heard this. 'Oh, Dino,' he said. 'That's huge. I'll be there, don't worry.'

After getting off the phone, he thought about Dino as a father, and then about his own prospects of procreating. He would never have children now; it wasn't in his future. He felt sorry for himself, but even sorrier for Teena. Then, from the apartment below his own, he heard his neighbour berating her toddler, shouting, 'Stop it! Stop it!' with rising desperation, and he couldn't help but feel marginally better.

This was when the buzzer went. He opened the door in his pajamas, which consisted of track pants and an old college tee shirt. It was Zoë, Teena's friend, dropping off a climbing harness that she had borrowed at some point. She said, 'It's been sitting there forever. About time I returned it.'

'Teena's out, I'm afraid. At work.'

'No, no, I know.' She smiled. 'I just wanted to drop it off. I've been clearing things out, lightening the load.'

Sebastian hastily closed the moleskin on the table. Then he looked again at Zoë, who seemed different somehow. He hadn't seen her in some time, so that could have been it, but her face was fresh and bright, her skin dewy and translucent. It was as if her inner self was fizzing up inside her, brimming closer to the surface than usual. It was a strange thing to think of someone who had been a soldier, someone he knew to be capable of toughness, yet he was struck by the way she seemed so open and unguarded. And that bright fizzy aura – it made her strangely charismatic. What was Dino's word? Compelling. Unexpectedly, he felt something in him responding, like his own inner self was brimming up as well.

Feeling overwhelmed, he surveyed the kitchenette, searching for a distraction, if not a solution. It was always the same; his responses embarrassed him. 'Do you want coffee? Or a cookie? They're out of date, I think – although when are they not.'

'No,' she said and laughed. She moved to the window and looked out.

He followed her gaze, wondering what she was thinking. After a long moment in which they just stood there, side by side, he kept his gaze on the scene and asked, 'Was this what you thought it would be like, when we got to be real adults?'

She laughed again in a hollow way. Her eyes glittered darkly. 'No,' she said. 'Why, what did you expect? How did you think things would be?'

‘I don’t know. Maybe – maybe more like a Wong Kar-Wai film, I guess, with really attractive robots.’

‘You’re a true romantic.’

Was she flirting with him? The thought was enlivening and a charge ran through his body. He didn’t want to cheat on Teena, but he was afraid of missing out. He feared a future in which no woman would look at him twice, let alone want to have sex with him. (He was forgetting for the moment that Teena had sex with him all the time.)

Zoë met his eyes. She scrutinized him briefly, tilted her head and said, ‘It’s nice to see you, Sebastian. I’ve always liked you, you know.’

‘Good. I’m glad to hear it. I like to be liked.’ Her words left a pleasant glow; he might have been basking in a sunbeam. Then the thought came to him: *she knows, Teena has told her*. He smiled sardonically to cover his dismay. He said, ‘Next you’ll be asking me if it was the solar flare.’

‘What?’ She looked blank. He realised his mistake.

‘Oh, nothing. Don’t worry. It’s just...words coming out of my mouth, not in any order.’

‘Right, sure, of course.’ Her eyes darted around the room and he was reminded of his surgeon, the troubled Dr Seymour with his tales of patients past. Was there a sadness in her smile? He sensed a ruefulness. Then it occurred to him she had come knowing Teena would be out. Was that what this was, a sex thing? What was he meant to think?

She patted the harness on the table. ‘Well, I had better go.’

‘Okay, yes. Of course.’

Perhaps feeling self-conscious, she left in a hurry. He was left standing in the apartment and pondering their encounter. The visit left him excited, if a little puzzled, and when Teena came home that evening they had energetic sex. He thought about Zoë, trying

to visualize her body, what she would look like without clothes. He did the same the next morning, too, when he and Teena had sex again. This time he found it harder to summon Zoë's image. It didn't matter: he didn't need to. He cupped his girlfriend's breasts and felt an intensifying pleasure. She was not on birth control so he came in her mouth. Afterward, with her eyes still level with his abdomen, she pulled some lint from his navel and said, 'I don't know why these sheets are shedding so much fluff.'

'It was great for me too,' he said.

'Sorry. I didn't mean –'

'No, I know. Just kidding.'

She moved to get dressed for work, and he got up, invigorated. This was when he floated an idea he'd had in a flight of inspiration during the night: he could go to District 6-13 without worrying about insurance. He mentioned this casually to Teena, stopping to reflect, 'Anyway, what do they really cover when it comes down to it?'

'No.' She rounded on him. 'Just no. That is not an option.'

'I'm not doing anything here. It could be just for a few days.'

'Honestly, Sebastian, are you listening to yourself?'

How quickly the mood had flipped! The air was tense between them. Only now did he notice that she had unpacked his travel bag, putting his things away at some point while he was out. A cockroach scuttled across the floor where it had been and she lunged to hit it with a book. She missed it, it escaped, and she turned back to him angrily.

'And just so you know, I saw the tabs on your laptop. I know what you're doing, why you're listening to that music. But seriously, Sebastian. Dido's Lament? Are you kidding me?'

Here he froze guiltily. She didn't wait for a response. 'And now you want to go to 6-13. Admit it, you're addicted.' As she spoke, she leaned out the window to pull in the

towels she had hung out. They were dancing in the breeze, which meant a crack in the shield and a risk of dust. She tossed the towels down as she went on. 'I've been out three years. You're the one who keeps going back.'

'Someone has to cover it! Even if everyone's stopped reading.'

'Totally, of course. But at this point is that you?'

Her words stung. He shook his head, growing defensive. When they met, he had been the vehemently anti-war correspondent. That was still who he was, what he was all about. He couldn't believe she would want him to give that up. 'So what, I hang out here, thinking about this shit?'

'Yes, maybe! I know you hate it. But listen, Sebastian, this is not the end. There are always new drugs coming out. Every quarter, every month. This is war and you have to fight.'

'Is it, though? Is it? I know everyone says that. "Such-and-such lost a long battle with cancer." But I've seen warfare, Teena, and it's a dumb comparison. The whole thing about war is not just trying to stay alive, it's that you actually have to make other people die. And *then* you stay alive, and afterward you go home and try to live with yourself, which maybe you can and maybe you can't.'

It wasn't the first time that he'd had this thought; he had been developing the idea for the last little while. He had imagined expounding it in front of an audience, perhaps while on a panel or possibly as a guest on a TV program. 'Yes, Bob,' he might say, warming to his theme, 'I would say that is the difference. I would say that is a very salient difference.'

But he wasn't on a panel. He was talking to Teena, and as he said the words out loud and he saw her face close over, he knew he had gone too far.

'You know what?' she said. 'I am going to the gym.'

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘Teena – ’

But she was heading out the door, she wouldn’t wait to hear it. Feeling awful, he called her phone. She must have turned it off because it went straight to her voicemail. He was trying her again when she burst back in. She stood in the doorway, looking shocked and confused. Her phone was buzzing in her hand, and she looked from it to Sebastian, as though she didn’t know what she should do with it. ‘It’s Zoë. She’s dead.’

‘What?’

‘Jamal just called to tell me. There’s going to be a memorial.’

‘No.’ His hands rose to his mouth of their own accord. ‘No,’ he said again.

‘She killed herself,’ she said. Her face sagged with disbelief, but as soon as she’d said the words Sebastian understood. As horrible as it was, he was all too able to believe it. He thought of how Zoë had seemed when he’d seen her the day before. He thought of the signs he’d missed, or wilfully misread.

And then Teena, staring, told him, ‘She did it at the cliffs.’

*

Over the next couple of days, they learned more about what had happened. A work crew had spotted a body at the bottom of a 100-metre cliff. The site was not far from the hut they had stayed in days before. The crew were unable to reach Zoë and called emergency services. They came out in a light aircraft, took several attempts to land on a rocky ledge, and at last retrieved the body, covering it with plastic. Her family would later be told that it would be best to identify her from her dental records. From what other rock-climber friends said of the spot where she was found, at a surprising distance from the base of the cliff, it was apparent that Zoë had taken a running jump. Sebastian pictured her doing this; he was struck by her resolve. She had not stood at the edge, looking over

before she leapt. Perhaps she knew that if she did so she would lose her nerve. Perhaps she knew this from having made earlier attempts.

They went to the memorial that was held three days later, gathering in a public park near a struggling copse of trees. It was late afternoon; a breeze whipped the leaflets that people held in their hands. These bore a photo of Zoë in camouflage gear, plus the years of her birth and death and the words *In memoriam*. It was a no-fuss event, which was partly intentional. Jamal, Zoë's brother, preferred the park to an inside venue, and there wasn't any music because there wasn't a sound system. 'We didn't want music, anyway,' he said, emanating a weariness that made him look kind of broken. 'No readings or poems. We would rather let folks say a few words about Zoë.'

Sebastian stood at Teena's side but she refused to hold his hand. She was brittle and withdrawn. Her mouth made a small, firm line. Someone had propped up a framed photo on a folding card table; it showed Zoë smiling in front of some craggy cliffs. Seeing it, Sebastian asked, 'Is this meant to be a joke? I mean, a photo of the cliffs?'

'It's not a joke,' said Teena crossly. 'She really loved climbing.'

A few people spoke about Zoë in turn: her brother described her struggle with PTSD, which she had gone to great lengths to hide, and then a guy from her unit told of how she had always encouraged him. 'Once, I was having a hard time, and she made me watch a video of Arnold Schwarzenegger.' He tried to do Arnie's voice: 'All the time people ask me how many lifts I do, but I only start counting when it begins to hurt.'

It was sobering for Sebastian, standing there to listen. He had spent the preceding days thinking about what Zoë had done. He thought it was the most radically free act he had ever known someone to commit. As he listened, though, it dawned on him that her act was not free at all – that in fact she had been driven to escape her suffering, that her

demons had all but chased her off the cliff. He hadn't known about her illness. It must have been terrible.

The other thing that struck him was the glaring contrast between this memorial and his own imaginary one, and all his folly, his vanity, descended on him at once. It wasn't just that he'd been wrong about Zoë's state of mind. He had been totally seduced by the false romance of death, but here and now he was confronting the unadorned fact of it. Envisioning your send-off was a diversion, he realised. Anyway, who did he think he was trying to impress? Life was the thing, that was all you had, and once it was gone there wasn't anything else. But then the question of how to live was a lot less fun to dwell on. There were more variables involved than in a one-off event.

The soldier was still speaking, describing the time on one deployment that they had rolled into a settlement. The place was oddly quiet but then all hell broke loose. They found themselves in an ambush, a unit of eighteen surrounded by upwards of three hundred insurgents and having to withstand five hours of nonstop fire. 'I probably aged ten years that day,' he said. 'I thought, this is it. Game on. Welcome to the war.' He chuckled nervously, without humour. 'You know what? All I wanted to do was go out in a good way. That was my thing. I didn't want to just die on my knees?' He seemed to appeal to those listening, looking from one face to another. Then he turned his eyes to the propped-up photograph of Zoë. 'Well, Zoë,' he said, 'I didn't. And you didn't either.'

Now it was Teena's turn. She moved forward to speak. She related how her friend had come to New Province. 'She knew that staying where she was meant limited prospects. She sought to make something of herself. She was looking for reinvention.' Here Sebastian blinked. He heard himself in this description. He too had wanted to reinvent himself. This was why he had wanted to go to space, why he had moved, soon after college, to the growing settlement. But what was then a desire was now a necessity:

he would have to find some new way to reinvent himself, to remake himself so fully as to confound all expectations. This time it was urgent. It was a matter of life and death. He had to find a way to stay ahead of the disease, to inhabit a zone beyond the probable.

By this time it was getting hard to hear what Teena was saying. To Sebastian's irritation, there was a commotion in the street, some kind of noisy parade. He strained to hear over the racket. Then Teena stopped and started coughing, having inhaled some dust carried on the breeze. Recovering, she described meeting Zoë on their first deployment. She had been the captain of Zoë's unit. Her voice broke as she said, 'I was responsible for her.'

The parade was getting louder as it approached. 'That might do us,' called Jamal. He comforted Teena, patting her shoulder, and turned to tell the group, 'Please have some coffee and cake.' People loitered and tried to chat, but it was increasingly hard to hear. Sebastian found Teena. 'What is that *noise*?' he asked, fed up.

'The Day Zero parade,' she answered distractedly.

'No. Today's Day Zero.'

'Yes,' she said. 'So?'

Dino's party, the opening – he had completely forgotten. He looked at his watch with a sinking feeling. It was already almost six. The function had started an hour ago. 'I've got to go. It's Dino's thing. I'm sorry. Can you drive?'

Teena looked pissed off. She had every right to be. 'Really, Sebastian? On today of all days, really?'

She dashed her coffee on the ground, turned and started walking. He had to hurry to keep up with the pace she set. Finding the buggy where they had parked, they took a route they thought would avoid the parade, but they had to keep diverting because of road closures. The traffic was a nightmare and Teena was getting agitated. She drove

aggressively, angrily, taking the turns at speed. He tried to navigate but this had never been his strong suit. ‘Was that Musk Avenue?’ he asked. ‘Why didn’t you take that turn?’

Everything was going wrong. The dust was getting worse: another fissure must have opened on the west side of the shield. They were being subjected to a taste of the outside storm, which darkened the twilight sky as though it was night. Teena switched on the fog lights and peered through the windscreen. Leaning forward, Sebastian looked out too. It was a dystopic scene. He saw pedestrians struggling through the conditions, attempting to find their way, and their hunched figures made him think of cancer patients he had passed in corridors. The idea came to him that he was looking at his future. He would become one of the craven, the poisoned and irradiated, the hairless shrunken people grimly hanging on, scouring online forums for miracle drugs and superfoods. This was what lay ahead, he thought. Welcome to the war.

Now they swung around a corner and he realised where they were. At the top of the street, he discerned the outline of the embassy for the Allied Planetary Co-Security Union, a monolithic stone building topped by a steeple-like flagpole. Teena pulled up and parked.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘Happy?’ They got out. She had to shout over the wind and the snarling traffic. ‘Well, what does it matter, anyway, hanging around for a memorial? Zoë’s dead. So what? That doesn’t mean anything to you.’

He was a few metres ahead, having already started walking, but now he rounded on her to say, with a violence that surprised him, ‘It means something to me. It means a lot to me, in fact. Zoë’s gone and I’m really sorry, but tonight matters to Dino and life is for survivors.’

Teena stopped on the road. He thought she would leave him there, she would just turn around and go. Maybe she thought so too. Then, at last, it was as if she had seen something new in him. And she had. There was something new. *Life is for survivors.*

‘Okay,’ she said finally. ‘If that’s how you feel, okay.’ She caught him up, drawing her coat about her and shoving her hands into her pockets. ‘Come on,’ she said severely, but beginning to relent. ‘Those shoes. It’s embarrassing.’

‘Dino won’t care.’

‘No.’

‘I’ll order a new pair, promise.’

Then the traffic was surging forward, the road having cleared ahead, and tipping their heads against the wind they headed for the party.

MOBILE LIVES

**'The Expatriates: Short stories' and
'The Possibilities of Expatriate Fiction: Exegesis'**

Jo Lennan

BA LLB (Hons) BCL

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VOLUME II

The Possibilities of Expatriate Fiction: Exegesis

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Abstract

This is a creative writing PhD thesis comprised of two related parts: the short story cycle ‘The Expatriates’ and its accompanying exegesis ‘The Possibilities of Expatriate Fiction’. Both the short story cycle and the exegesis explore the possibilities of expatriate fiction – here meaning fictional works that are either about expatriates or written by writers living abroad.

‘The Expatriates’ is a cycle of eight short stories. Animated by Walter Benjamin’s notion of the seafaring merchant as a teller of stories from afar, and aspiring to fictional virtues of movement and lightness, these stories seek to render contemporary experiences of living ‘abroad’ – in the original sense of being at large, or the contemporary sense of being in another country.

Trading in themes of escape and reinvention, the collection features varied settings: a mill town in southeastern New South Wales; two cities in Japan; the back rooms of Heathrow Airport; an artists’ colony in Spain; an apartment in Moscow; a Sydney café; and an unnamed, Mars-like planet. Rather than treating these settings as exceptionally exotic, however, the stories reveal specific instantiations of modernity, or what Drusilla Modjeska calls ‘the stuff of (modern) lives’ (*Timepieces* 209).

The exegesis, ‘The possibilities of expatriate fiction’, turns first to twentieth-century depictions of modern, mobile lives. Confronting longstanding critical traditions that describe Christina Stead and Mavis Gallant as ‘expatriate’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ writers

without examining how these commitments manifested in their works, this study reveals the authors' distinctive cosmopolitanisms.

One chapter examines the cosmopolitan character of Stead's *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946), an interloper's novel of New York that was written in the tradition of European picaresque narratives. Another reads two of Gallant's early stories, 'Travellers Must Be Content' and 'The Cost of Living', as depicting not only the opportunities but also the costs of an expatriate existence, foregrounding notions of costliness and economy. The comparative discussion of these texts reveals a range of ambivalent states and negotiations with ideas of the nation and belonging.

A concluding chapter turns to the implications of expatriatism and cosmopolitanism for a contemporary writer. Surveying recent re-readings of these concepts in critical and literary theory, it builds on Shameem Black's defence of the possibility of 'noninvasive imaginative acts' that 'question, rather than inevitably reinscribe, the inequalities and injustices of a globalizing world' (65). Offering an account of the overlapping concerns and tactics in 'The Expatriates', it maps a provisional ethos and terrain for a fiction that evokes new expatriate states.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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The Possibilities of Expatriate Fiction: Exegesis

1. Introduction

There are two types of writers, as Walter Benjamin had it. In his 1935 essay ‘The Storyteller’, he contrasted the ‘trading seaman’ with the ‘tiller of the soil’, ‘someone who has come from afar’ versus ‘the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions’ (363). The impetus for this doctoral project, in its most basic form, came from an interest in the sort of literature that ventures outward, corresponding with the travelling storyteller in Benjamin’s typology. In its major work, it seeks a fictional mode expressive of movement and lightness, two virtues proposed by Italo Calvino in his lectures, or ‘memos’, on fiction (*Six Memos* 46, 35). At the same time, rather than looking to ahistorical abstractions or an idealised past, it seeks a fiction that grapples with modern, mobile lives, attends to economic and societal dynamics (contemporary echoes of the trade of Benjamin’s ‘trading seaman’), and allows for the ambivalence of expatriate states.

With this originating impetus in mind, this exegesis turns to expatriate fiction. Written to accompany the short stories that form the creative component of the project, it proceeds by considering the literary choices of two expatriate writers, Christina Stead and Mavis Gallant, selecting particular works that show such choices at play. Specifically, it asks: what are the possibilities of expatriate fiction as represented by Stead’s novel *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946) and Gallant’s early stories ‘Travellers Must Be Content’ (1952) and ‘The Cost Of Living’ (1962)? It goes on to consider the possibilities of contemporary expatriate fiction, situating the creative component of this thesis, a short story sequence called ‘The Expatriates’, in the context of recent and unfolding debates.

The phrase ‘expatriate fiction’ is used to mean both fictional works about expatriates and works written by writers living abroad. Such an encapsulation immediately begs further scrutiny and discussion (who gets to be an expatriate?), which is one of the tasks of the chapters that follow. It conveniently points to the role of ficto-critical research, in which literary texts and creative practice inform and unsettle each other. The exegesis also pursues a dialogue of a different sort: considering the works of two different writers, it asks what can be learned from reading them side by side, with an eye to the contrasts that help to bring them into focus. This follows the comparative approach taken by Anne Carson in *Economy Of The Unlost*, which considers the ancient Greek lyric poet Simonides of Keos alongside the twentieth century Romanian poet Paul Celan. Explaining why she paired two poets separated by the ages, Carson wrote:

They keep each other from settling. Moving and not settling, they are side by side in a conversation and yet no conversation takes place. Face to face, yet they do not know one another, did not live in the same era, never spoke the same language. With and against, aligned and adverse, each is placed like a surface on which the other may come into focus. (Carson viii)

Christina Stead and Mavis Gallant were not exact contemporaries, but both lived and worked abroad for much of their lives. Stead, an Australian (1902–1983), lived variously in London, continental Europe and the United States, while Gallant, a Canadian (1922–2014), lived in Paris. Stead made her name with novels, whereas Gallant found success publishing short stories, over 100 of which appeared in *The New Yorker*. Their works can be seen to represent different literary tactics, offering distinctive answers to the question of how to write about life abroad, and the contrast brings these choices into sharper focus. The contrast of form (between the novel and short stories) is deliberate too, opening the way to considerations of how these forms embody qualities of movement.

The essays focus on these mid-twentieth century works partly because they were written and published when the expatriate loomed large in literature and art, and English literature was ‘dominated ... by foreigners and expatriates’ (Eagleton 9). As Nicholas Birns writes of Stead, ‘She left her home country, as did Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, D. H. Lawrence and Robert Graves, in an age when literature was often associated with expatriation, exile and internationalism’ (*Contemporary Australian Literature* 27). In considering the category of expatriate fiction, I am starting with works from a time that was paradigmatically identified with expatriation; this makes it possible to recognise later continuities and departures. These particular works have also been chosen because there is, as I will argue, more to be said about them; they are yet to fully understood on their own terms.

1.1 Outline of Chapters

This exegesis is made up of four linked chapters or essays.

Chapter 1 (the present chapter) is introductory. It first critically examines the central notion of expatriatism against other related concepts such as cosmopolitanism, then situates Stead and Gallant as twentieth-century expatriate writers – and specifically as women writers – for whom life abroad held particular promise. This discussion serves as a prelude to the analyses of particular texts in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2 considers the cosmopolitanism of Stead’s *Letty Fox: Her Luck*, a biting funny story of a single ‘New York girl’ in Manhattan. With its blistering portrayal of New York

social mores, coming as it did from an interloper, it offended many American critics. In Australia, the book was banned for sexual obscenity. These contemporaneous responses gave scant attention to the book's influences and formal qualities as a picaresque novel. Picaresque narratives, which typically feature a roguish antihero 'abroad' at a time of loosening social strictures, have long been a mode of telling stories about subversive mobility. In examining *Letty Fox* in terms of earlier European traditions as well as its New World peers, this chapter explores and reveals the distinctive cosmopolitanism of Stead's novel and the way it problematised women's belonging within the nation.

Chapter 3 considers two of Gallant's early stories, 'Travellers Must Be Content' and 'The Cost of Living'. Where Stead's book described the inhabitants of her adoptive New York, Gallant chose (as she did in many of her stories) to make expatriates her subjects. Informed by a post-war ambivalence about uprooted lives, the stories show characters in search of escape and transformation. Gallant chose, this chapter argues, to write of the costs as much as the opportunities of life abroad. In particular, the stories foreground notions of costliness and economy while casting the idea of belonging as inherently problematic. Further, the marked concision of the stories suggests the elisions and silences of loss and estrangement.

Chapter 4, the concluding chapter, has a more discursive character, and turns to the interplay of research and creative practice that has shaped this project. It reconsiders the central question – what are the possibilities of expatriate fiction? – in the light of contemporary theory and practice, especially recent readings of cosmopolitanism and expatriatism. Following Shameem Black's defence of the possibility of 'noninvasive imaginative acts' that 'question, rather than inevitably reinscribe, the inequalities and

injustices of a globalizing world' (65), the chapter sets out a provisional ethos and terrain for new expatriate fictions. It aims to recover and repurpose a more expansive expatriatism, one which encompasses a range of ambivalent states and negotiations with the nation and belonging.

1.2 Situating Twentieth-Century Expatriatism

With its Latinate components *ex* ('out of') and *patria* ('native country'), the word 'expatriate' now refers to a person who lives abroad, but it once had two different, opposing meanings. On one hand, it meant the banishment of a person; on the other, it meant an act of withdrawing from one's country or, in law, renouncing one's citizenship or allegiance ('expatriate, v.', OED). It is useful to recall these contradictory origins – representing a central confusion as to why an expatriate is abroad – in parsing more recent understandings. As will be seen, discussions of expatriates, and especially expatriate writers and artists, tend to stress either the exilic or the renunciatory aspect, emphasising the conditions that made it hard to stay at home or the volitional agency of a life abroad. As will also be seen, views range between the approving and the slighting. An expatriate is either (on a sympathetic view) to be credited with good reasons for having left his or her country, or lauded as a cosmopolitan; or (on a sceptical or disparaging stance) seen as having chosen a privileged, unearned and gratuitous displacement, a faux-exilic state of which we ought to be suspicious.

In sociological literature, definitions typically follow the approach of Ulf Hannerz in treating expatriatism as a matter of fact – a bare category – that does not necessarily involve a particular outlook or perspective. Expatriates, as Hannerz writes, are just as

likely to be ‘organisation men’ working for corporate entities in foreign offices as they are to be artists or writers, and not all will subscribe to a cosmopolitan ethos, with a ‘self-directed curiosity’ about the world (243).¹ Thus expatriatism is not the same as cosmopolitanism, although they may often go together. In literary studies of expatriate writers, by contrast, the writer’s choice to go abroad – the renunciatory act – takes on greater significance. In discussions of twentieth century writers, the idea of expatriatism was variously allied with or distinguished from exile. The argument in favour of maintaining a strict distinction between the two categories was championed in the 1970s by the influential American critic Mary McCarthy (‘Exiles, Expatriates, and Internal Émigrés’). As Ann Blake has more recently put it, drawing on McCarthy:

‘Exile’ is in truth a misnomer for the voluntary exile... Exiles are not free to return; expatriates are. Hemingway and Fitzgerald and their Parisian group were expatriates, for, when the going got tough, they could pack up and go home. Exile for McCarthy means that lack of choice that a political situation or, often, a shortage of money inflicts on writers. (52)

In contrast, in an example of the freer usage that risked collapsing the categories into each other, Terry Eagleton’s study of modern writers, *Exiles and Émigrés* (1970), called D. H. Lawrence an exile on the ground that he was working class (192). In Eagleton’s description, Lawrence was ‘an exile from his own culture’ who pursued ‘rootless, frustrated wanderings in Europe, America, Australia [and] New Mexico’ (192). The argument is suggestive, rightly drawing attention to the circumstances of Lawrence’s life and how his assigned place in the culture made it hard to write at home. Related arguments can be made with respect to women writers, too, and these questions are taken up in

¹ This bare category approach to expatriatism has echoes in newer discussions of transnationalism, which has been described as ‘merely a state of cultural movement’ and likewise distinguished from cosmopolitanism (Shaw 14).

Drusilla Modjeska's study *Exiles at Home* (1981), which considers Australian women writers between the years 1925 and 1945.

In the case of women expatriate writers, we should recognise that the distinction which accords exilic status to the politically oppressed and denies it to those who are banished to the domestic sphere is itself a construct that genders the exile as male. As Modjeska has shown, there were 'very real brakes operating on women writers', even if these did not always take the form of 'overt oppression' (Modjeska 1). It should not be overlooked that, among Australian women writers of the early twentieth century, the ones who did best were the ones who left the country: Henry Handel Richardson and Stead (3). And as Ros Pesman remarks in her historical study of Australian women abroad, it is no coincidence that women artists and writers, as 'the more restricted gender at home', have long been drawn to expatriate life (10).

Without collapsing the real distinction between expatriates and exiles, we can and should recognise gradations such as these. We need accounts of expatriatism that comprehend both sorts of drivers, the push and the pull, the difficult home conditions and the self-determined journeys. What these considerations suggest is not that we should see all these writers as exiles, but rather that we should attend to their particular, conditioned expatriations. That is, while the expatriate's displacement is a voluntary one, it may also be conditioned by exigency or constraint, these being questions of degree rather than absolutes.

Equally, questions of privilege loom large in discussions of expatriatism. In her recent analysis of American expatriate fiction, Caren Irr specifies the nature of the expatriate's privilege:

Alienated from American culture and drawn toward a European and/or primitive alternative, the expatriate hero aspires to a bohemian placelessness, *even though crucial lines of material support anchor him in a home country*. Expatriate writing develops a vision designed to correct for the home country's failures and, consequently, addresses a home audience. (178, emphasis added and references omitted)

In this account, the expatriate is a seeker of self-transformation and, often, full of 'erotic urges', with Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) figuring as the 'inescapable' predecessor of the expatriate novel (Irr 10, 179).² It will already be apparent from Modjeska's and Pesman's studies that many literary expatriates had predecessors other than Hemingway, but the description is useful in representing a common view. In particular, the expatriate anticipates 'an eventual return' (Irr 178). This expectation, which features in many discussions of expatriatism, is taken to ground the distinction between expatriates and migrants, even though this distinction is often far from clear (Irr 179). It has recently been argued that the true, albeit cloaked, distinction is one of race (Koutonin, 'Why Are White People Expats...'). Indeed, this is one of two arguments for the irrelevance of expatriatism, and features in the discussion of contemporary writing and debates in Chapter 4.

Throughout, 'expatriate' is used as a term of discussion not to glide over such questions but to bring them into view. It is used for the same reasons that James Clifford uses 'travel' in arguing for comparative studies of travelling cultures: it is a term he 'hang[s] onto'

² The view of the expatriate as a disaffected American in search of exotic sexual experience finds expression in Carolyn Forché's poem 'Expatriate': 'Twenty year old poet . . . in love with some woman who cannot speak English . . . It would be good if you could wind up in prison and so write your prison poems.'

precisely because of its historical taintedness, its connotations of literariness, and its associations with class and ‘racial bodies’ (110). ‘I prefer it to more apparently neutral, and “theoretical” terms, such as displacement, which can make the drawing of equivalences across different historical experiences too easy,’ Clifford writes (110). This usage reflects an opposition to any ‘overly sanguine view of the mobility of poor, usually non-white people who *must* leave home in order to survive’ (107, original emphasis).

To return to cosmopolitanism, mentioned at the outset, what is the relevance of this concept to expatriatism? Many of the attributes associated with expatriatism – the degree of privilege and volitional mobility, for example – are often identified as aspects of cosmopolitanism, in line with Hannerz’s basic approach (Hannerz 243). Thus, for Anthony Appiah, cosmopolitanism conjures up the discomfiting prospect of an intellectual dressed in tasteful designer clothes taking an open-minded interest in a farmer in overalls (xiii). For Bruce Robbins, the word cosmopolitan evokes a person with ‘independent means, high tech tastes and globe-trotting mobility’ (312). This illustrates the extent to which discussions of expatriatism and cosmopolitanism can shade into each other, and why both concepts are kept in view throughout this exegesis. In philosophy, cosmopolitanism is an ethical concept which can be traced to the Cynics of the fourth century BC, and particularly the oft-quoted statement of Diogenes of Sinope, who coined the word *kosmopolitês*, ‘a citizen of the cosmos’. As Appiah explains:

The cosmos referred to the world, not in the sense of the earth, but in the sense of the universe. Talk of cosmopolitanism originally signalled, then, a rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities. (xiii-xiv)

Robbins, favouring a comparative cosmopolitanism, also cites the concepts of earlier Egyptian antecedents, and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological research on the cosmopolitanism of native Americans along the Pacific Northwest coast (Robbins 182).

The cosmopolitan ideal found an especially influential expression in Kant's universalist ideas of history and peace, in the essay 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose'. In one variant that emerged from the aftermath of World War II, cosmopolitanism became identified with internationalism, an optimistic, politically-committed movement with an organisational ethos and a faith in emergent multilateral institutions.³ More recently, the universalist conception of cosmopolitanism has elicited objections. Writing from an American perspective at the close of the twentieth century, Timothy Brennan cautioned against a view of cosmopolitanism as 'timelessly alluring' and emphasised its imperial and neo-imperial dimensions (23-25). Robbins likewise challenged a Kantian cosmopolitanism, arguing that the idea is best understood not in terms of abstract values or negations of belonging, but in 'overlapping allegiances' – or in what he describes as its 'situatedness' (172). Similarly, for the sociologist Ulrich Beck, cosmopolitanism is an essentially contested idea (Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Perspective' 83; Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* 60).

These debates continue; in fact, such contestation has only increased. The implications of these debates for contemporary creative practice are considered in Chapter 4. In literary studies, the task is to trace the particular contours of the concept in any given text, to attend to varied expressions of cosmopolitanisms (or, to borrow Clifford's phrase, their 'discrepant cosmopolitanisms' (108)). Numerous studies consider the varied cosmopolitanisms of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literatures (see e.g. Anderson; Berman; Walkowitz). In turning to the fictions of Stead and Gallant, it is necessary to

³ Among Australian writers who are identified with internationalism are Shirley Hazzard, whose works are discussed in Chapter 3, and Neilma Sidney, the author of *Beyond The Bay* (1966). Hazzard worked at the United Nations; Sidney worked for the International Social Service, a refugee and adoption agency.

situate their specific expatriatisms – how they understood their own acts of expatriation – before turning to the expression of these concepts in their works.

1.3 Christina Stead and Mavis Gallant as Expatriate Writers

How, then, did these writers understand their expatriatism? It must be observed that both came from settler societies, where the motif of expatriatism has a special place; settler literatures face the task of defining the relationship between the periphery and the centre. As Nicholas Jose has written, the interplay between Australia and ‘Over There’ is a perennial in Australian literature and life (‘The Dream of Europe...’ 113). Despite her anti-imperial views, Stead later recalled that ‘when I looked at the map of those days sprinkled with empire pink, it seemed “useful” to me, because I could get a job in any of those pink spots’ (‘Why I Left’ 42). Having saved for three years to pay her fare, in what she called ‘an endurance test’ (43), she left her hometown of Sydney at the age of 26 and did not return until she was in her seventies. She lived a peripatetic existence, settling variously in London, Paris and New York and spending shorter stints in assorted European cities and on the west coast of the United States.⁴ Moving frequently with her longtime partner (eventually husband) William Blake, a Jewish-American economist and broker, Stead led a cosmopolitan though often insecure life. If their mobile Bohemia held some glamour to begin with, this gave way over the years to a deepening squalor, as Hazel Rowley reveals in her biography of the author.

⁴ Stead’s frequent relocations defy brief summary, but as an indication, and excluding numerous side trips, she lived in London in the late 1920s, Paris from 1930 to 1934, New York from 1935 to 1946, and then in Europe again (mostly in the United Kingdom) until 1974.

As Rowley describes, Stead was sustained by an idea of the voyage to Cythera, this being the island of love and the birthplace of Aphrodite (62). Familiar with Jean-Antoine Watteau's Rococo painting *Le pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère*, she held the view that setting out for Cythera – going abroad – was a positive, necessary step toward embracing a life of love and fulfilment. In Sydney, as the put-upon daughter of an oppressively overbearing father, she was expected to become a schoolteacher but was unsuited to the job (Rowley 38, 40, 48-49). She identified teaching with a moribund spinsterhood: female trainee teachers had to sign a contract not to marry until they worked off a substantial bond (Rowley 38, 46). Stead drew on and transmuted her origins in her books *For Love Alone* (1944) and *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), but it is no exaggeration to say that leaving them behind was her best chance at becoming a writer. In celebrating the fact she had gotten away, Stead adopted Nietzsche's exalted view of the free spirit versus the 'apathetic loafer'.⁵ Some people were 'wanderers', she claimed in one interview in 1935 (speaking with typical lack of tact to an Australian magazine), while others 'stew all their lives in their own juice and ferments' (Rowley 61).

Yet life was abroad was not all champagne and gadding about. More often than not, it was a 'shifty life' – Stead's words (Rowley 336). It was cheap hotels, furnished rooms, even a Brussels hotel-cum-brothel (where Stead was glad of the heating and clean sheets). At one point, the collapse of the shady bank that had employed Blake and Stead forced them to flee London. Two years later, they fled Spain as civil war broke out, struggled to get a flat in anti-Semitic Antwerp, and then, as Hitler proclaimed the need for German *Lebensraum*, sailed for New York again. In later years, Stead could not afford to return to

⁵ In *Human, All Too Human: A Book of Free Spirits* (1878), Nietzsche wrote that the reward for a curious soul who went out into the world was the awakening of his senses and faculties. 'It seems to him as if his eyes are only now open to what is close at hand,' he enthused. 'What a good thing he had not always stayed "at home", stayed "under his own roof" like a delicate apathetic loafer!' (Nietzsche 8).

Australia, which had a relatively high cost of living, and she and Blake lived in poverty in England (Rowley 334, 378). One factor that kept them there was the discriminatory nature of Australian immigration law, which extended residency to the wives but not the husbands of citizens, meaning Blake could not work in Australia.⁶

It is recognised that the reception of Stead's novels suffered by reason of her expatriate status (Blake 3; Summers 10; Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature* 27). At the height of her international fame in the 1960s, she was selected for and then denied the nation's richest literary prize, the Britannica Australia Award, worth a princely \$10,000. Although she was the unanimous choice of the selectors, Stead was rejected because of her long absence from the country and doubts over whether her work was of 'specific relation to Australia' (Brydon 161; Rowley 398).⁷ She was also, inconveniently in the time of McCarthyism, an unrepentant Marxist (Rowley 353, 358; Sheridan, 'Politics and Passion'). As Michael Ackland has cogently argued, Stead's politics were also a factor in the hardships she endured (Ackland 6).

One of the earliest arguments about the effects of Stead's expatriate status on her reputation came from Anne Summers in 1973. Summers drew attention to the achievements of Stead's novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) and argued that the 'revolutionary honours' that went to Patrick White for transforming Australian literature from 1939 onwards – when his first novel, *Happy Valley*, appeared – should have gone to Stead (10). As Birns has written, *Seven Poor Men* blends modernism with social realism;

⁶ Stead later chose to gloss over this obstacle, writing only that 'we started to make arrangements; but the oldest, simplest problems arise' ('Why I Left' 43).

⁷ Interestingly, Birns responds to Rowley's argument that Australia neglected Stead by adding that it was also the world's neglect. He writes that Stead's Australian-ness, and an attendant presumption of her provinciality as a writer, has worked against her (*Contemporary Australian Literature* 27).

written in Paris, it was influenced by James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) (Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature* 28). As Summers pointed out, Stead was the first to reject what White later called the 'dreary, dun-coloured' realism of Australian fiction.⁸ One could augment this argument by pointing also to the fable-like experiments of the *Salzburg Tales* (1934), which won Stead admirers on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet 'as an expatriate and a woman, she appears to have forfeited the right to be recognised as contributing to national literary traditions' (Summers 10).

Stead saw herself, as Blake has written, as 'an independent spirit, unconstrained by any vestiges of colonial or postcolonial feelings of inferiority, and committed to an internationalist view' (54). Her cosmopolitanism was markedly anti-imperialist; as a Marxist, she described the imperial project as 'a sell, especially for the colonies which are sold' (Ackland 43). At the personal level, however, she expressed mixed views about the expatriate life. 'You can write anywhere,' she confidently declared to the *London Magazine* in 1970 (Blake 1), but in later life she would complain to a friend, 'This life abroad unclasps all my contacts with life . . . I hate it'.⁹ She wrote that it was 'a snake's life' to shed one's skin as she had done (Rowley 228). In writing an essay entitled, 'Why I Left,' she not only dodged the question of the title, but ended by expressing the view that writers do best 'when not cut off from [their] country . . . otherwise they starve and wither' (Stead, 'Why I Left' 43). She diagnosed a particular difficulty in being a woman writer at large:

⁸ White voiced this criticism in his famous 1958 essay, 'The Prodigal Son' (White, *Patrick White Speaks* 16). He was astonished by Stead's novels, and when she was denied the Brittanica in 1967 he wrote in a rage to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'If the Higher Junta of Australian Intellect considers a novelist of genius like Christina Stead ineligible for its . . . award, it helps explain to me why, for some time past, I have felt a foreigner in this pathetically chauvinist parish' (Rowley 398).

⁹ Oddly, and for reasons unexplained, this revealing comment, which appears in early editions of Rowley's biography, is dropped from later ones.

There's a glamour of a diabolic, miserable sort attached to wandering, unhappy, uneasy, unkind rebel sons, but what about daughters — daughters who will not conform have no glamour, respect or love: what they have in mind interests no one. (Rowley 60)

In turning from Stead to Gallant, we meet with fewer grand pronouncements. Gallant was a writer who tended to sidestep questions (as she sidestepped many questions) about her expatriatism. When asked by the *Paris Review* if she thought of herself as a Parisian or an expatriate, she replied, 'I am a writer and, of course, a Canadian'.¹⁰ On another occasion, she said she did not apply the term 'expatriate' to herself as '[i]t has too definite a sound' (Hancock 61). Asked about her reasons for leaving, she pointed to the difficulty of making a living as a writer in Canada before the advent of arts grants (Hancock 29). Gallant professed impatience at the idea that culture played a part: she described being 'very offended' by the assertion of one U.S. publisher that Canada was 'the boondocks' (Hancock 37). Yet she also said she had disliked the 'stifling genteelism' of literary Canada, as well as what she saw as the country's 'iron-clad Presbyterian hypocrisy', and added that 'one's only desire was to escape' (Hancock 42, 55). In the same interview, she observed, 'But most people are trying to get out of the coop, aren't they?' (23). It should be noted that she could very well have chosen New York over Paris, but rejected the former as a place where she was already known, saying, 'I would not have felt free' (Hancock 29).

Gallant, who was two decades Stead's junior, grew up bilingual as the child of Anglophone parents in Francophone Québec (Hancock 22). Her childhood was unsettled: she attended no fewer than 17 schools in Canada and the U.S., ending up in New York, a

¹⁰ She continued by adding: 'Once, in Switzerland, emerging from a long anaesthetic, I had no idea where I was, or why. I knew only that I was a writer and from Quebec. I could hear someone speaking French and I thought I had been in a driving accident somewhere in Quebec. Finally I remembered my name' (Kalotay 195).

city she loved (Lahiri vii; Skelton Grant 1). She made the defining decision to go abroad at the age of twenty-seven, when she left Montreal for good. This was a decision of ‘sheer bravado,’ as Jhumpa Lahiri has written (vii). In 1950, on the strength of having published a few short stories in Canada and receiving one encouraging rejection letter from *The New Yorker* (‘Do you have anything else you can show us?’ she was asked), she left the regular pay-cheque from her job as a reporter at the *Montreal Standard* to travel to Europe, eventually to settle in Paris and devote herself to writing fiction (Lahiri vii-viii). Gallant herself said that the move was not ‘an impulsive gesture’ but planned and deliberate (Hancock 32).

Because Gallant was so private, so reluctant to talk about herself, the factors that led to her departure are little remarked upon. It is not well known, for example, that Gallant was fed up with the systemic pay discrimination she faced as a journalist in Montréal. At the *Standard*, where she worked for six years, Gallant objected in vain to being paid less than her junior male colleagues, and to her exclusion from a newly-formed, male-only reporters’ association (Keefer 5-6). This experience of being squeezed out was faced by many women in the workforce when World War II ended. Gallant later said she chose her adoptive country not least because it offered single women and writers a minimal degree of status and respect, rather than the peripheral status she perceived she could expect in Anglo-Saxon countries (Keefer 9). Even so, she knew her expatriation was a choice. On occasions when she felt like a foreigner in France, she was able to remark, ‘Thank God I am not a refugee; I can pack up and leave whenever I like’ (Keefer 211). The remark recalls Hannerz’s observation of the cosmopolitan: ‘At all times he knows where the exit is’ (240).

Over the coming decades, Gallant would publish over a hundred stories in the *New Yorker*. She penned numerous collections as well as two novels and a play. Where Stead made her way in a succession of cities, Gallant remained in Paris, living there until her death in 2014. And whereas Stead chose, in *Letty Fox*, to write as an interloper – depicting her adoptive city of New York and its denizens in extravagant detail – Gallant chose, in many of her stories, to turn her gaze instead on the uprooted, the adrift, and the expatriate. Like Stead, she rejected crude nationalism. She adhered to what she called the ‘old-fashioned, liberal and humanist idea’ that an artist owes ‘no more and no less to his compatriots than to people at large’ (Keefer 2).

It is striking the extent to which discussions of Gallant’s place in Canadian literature echo those about Stead’s place in Australian literature, featuring the same worries about subject matter and residence.¹¹ In her early career, Gallant’s books were not widely available in Canada (Skelton Grant 9). When her writing was reviewed, it often met with ‘hostility’ (Blodgett 2; Murray 108), to the point that Geoff Hancock, the long-time editor of *Canadian Fiction* magazine, once wrote a piece under the headline, ‘Let’s Stop Being Mean to Mavis Gallant’ (Murray 108). Gallant’s insistence on privacy, as much as her physical distance, meant that she continued to remain at a remove. Things began to change in the late 1970s when Douglas Gibson, an editor at Macmillan, published a Canadian edition of *From The Fifteenth District*, a collection that many regard as Gallant’s best (Skelton Grant 12). Surprised that it missed out on a shortlisting for a national prize, the Governor General’s Award For English-Language Fiction, Gibson then compiled a selection of Gallant’s previously-published Canada stories under the title *Home Truths*. This volume won the award in 1981. Gallant was later given official

¹¹ See especially E.D. Blodgett and Heather Murray’s essays in the Mavis Gallant issue of *Essays On Canadian Writing*, Winter 1990, as well as the other contributions to the volume.

honours in her country and, perhaps more remarkably, in Quebec, where in 2006 she became the first author writing in English to be honoured with the Prix Athanase-David.

Gallant's reputation now is as something of a writer's writer, which is another way of saying she is not generally famous. Francine Prose points out she is hard to claim as a national writer:

Perhaps the simplest explanation is that she was a Canadian short-story writer, born in Montreal, in 1922, living in Paris, where she worked initially as a journalist, writing in English, and publishing in the United States. It was hard for any country to claim her, to make her a public figure (which she would have resisted) or for readers to classify her as one thing or another. (Prose, 'Mavis Gallant's Magic Tricks')

This description is reminiscent of Stead's position, too. By coming later in time, however, Gallant perhaps had the advantage of a maturation in the idea of national literatures as such, so that even a writer who largely absented herself could later be reclaimed. More than that, her stories have never been out of favour in her other early home, New York, where they are championed by writers and editors associated with *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, whose publishing arm released the volume edited by Lahiri in 2009.

From the above, it can be concluded that the distance both Stead and Gallant kept from their respective national literatures indelibly shaped how their works were received. One consequence of this dynamic is that there has been – and remains – significant room for new readings of their works. In particular, while both authors are typically described as expatriate writers or cosmopolitan in outlook, sustained analyses of the ways these concepts or commitments manifest in their works have been relatively few. In the case of Stead, most of these centre on *For Love Alone* (1944), which of all her books is most overtly concerned with emigration and expatriation (Modjeska, *Exiles at Home* 28; Jose,

‘The Dream of Europe’ 114-116; Sheridan, ‘Christina Stead’s For Love Alone’ 174; Yelin 38). Louise Yelin has analysed *The Man Who Loved Children* as ‘a discursive site in which national identity is contested’ (18). Nicholas Birns has drawn out the hidden resonances of Australia in *Letty Fox* and the posthumously published *I’m Dying Laughing* (1986) (*Contemporary Australian Literature* 42; ‘Merely Unfriendly or Slightly Critical’).

Of Gallant, Charlotte Sturgess has argued that her successive collections offer both a ‘placed’ and ‘placeless’ quality, thereby translating a duality that is internal to the idea of Canada itself, with its English and French origins (10-11). More recently, Jacob von Baeyer has shown how two of Gallant’s middle-period stories yield ‘a spectrum of representation and experience, from euphoric visions of shared humanity to more complex pictures of global citizenship’ (von Baeyer 187). Building on these approaches, then, the next chapters turn to the texts under discussion, examining them as expatriate fictions.

2. New York Picaresque: The Cosmopolitanism of Christina Stead's *Letty Fox*

2.1. Introduction: *Letty Fox* as an Interloper's Novel of New York

For the writer who goes abroad, another choice waits in the wings: whether to imaginatively plunder the past, or to write of Benjamin's 'afar', the people and places they encounter elsewhere. It is true that some things are best imagined with the benefit of distance, and getting away can give a writer licence. Some authors go on returning to the places whence they came: one thinks of the novelist and poet David Malouf, living in Campagnatico, Italy, and turning his imaginative gaze to the Queensland of his childhood, or further back to a historical Queensland.¹² The other course, that of playing the interloper, is to assert what amounts to a different sort of licence, and this is Christina Stead's tactic in her novel *Letty Fox*. In choosing to focus on this novel, I am interested particularly in the possibilities of the picaresque novel, with its virtues of movement and irreverence, as one mode of expatriate fiction. As the story of a rogue's progress, and of the struggle to get by, the picaresque narrative turns its back on domestic settings. *Letty Fox* is, significantly, a book by and not about an expatriate, but it is still, I contend, concerned with life abroad.

As this chapter will argue, Stead wrote about New York from the outside in, as an interloper (Section 2.1). Her influences were cosmopolitan: *Letty Fox* borrowed the irreverent spirit and narrative conventions of a picaresque genre that first sprang to life in the flux of Reformation Europe with tales of roguish characters 'abroad' in the early sense

¹² For his Queensland novels of the 1980s, for example, Malouf chose to write the first and last drafts at his home in Tuscany. He wrote second and third drafts in Brisbane, where he could check facts (Baker 234 ff).

of being away from home (Section 2.2). Drawing on these European as well as American influences, Stead refashioned the genre to write a quintessentially New York story about her roguish protagonist, a jobbing word-stringer and young woman about town (Section 2.3). In shirking the putative tasks of a national literature and giving herself licence to write of America, Stead wrote a radically distinctive American picaresque that presaged other examples, such as Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) (Section 2.4).

In situating *Letty Fox* as Stead's first truly American novel, it is useful to first consider the case of *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), the novel that gave Stead lasting stature. In 2010, *Time* included it in a list of 100 top novels published since the magazine's founding in 1923, describing it as 'the greatest picture ever of the lousiest family of all time' (Lacayo and Grossman, 'All-TIME 100 Best Novels'). In a 2016 essay, Jonathan Franzen called it a masterpiece ('Rereading *The Man Who Loved Children*'). Stead initially conceived of this novel, which drew heavily on her childhood and especially her relationship with her larger-than-life father, as a Sydney story; one early sketch has a local species of sea eagle visiting a character in a dream (Stead, 'Uncle Morgan at the Nats' 491). Her publishers Simon & Schuster insisted the novel would sell better with an American setting, however (Rowley 230). Stead duly uprooted her fictional family of Pollits to Georgetown, Washington and the shabbier Eastport, at the head of Chesapeake Bay. Still the daughter of her naturalist father, she cribbed on all things Maryland, from the folklore to the ecology, right down to the soil profiles (Rowley 230).

Even so, the book had a doubly fraught reception. Many American reviewers, like the influential Mary McCarthy, found fault with Stead's attempts at verisimilitude, criticising

the slang of her characters as anachronistic (Rowley 231). The book received a flat reception in Australia too; as Michelle de Kretser argues, this was a consequence of ‘Oz Lit’s eternal preoccupation with cultural DNA testing’ (de Kretser, *The Man Who Loved Children...*). This view of the novel’s Australian reception should be tempered somewhat, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* gave it a favourable review (Williams 145), and it seems that every successive Stead revival makes its case on the basis that no one has ever appreciated her work before. Nonetheless, it would take 25 years and a champion in the person of the poet Randall Jarrell for the book to be rediscovered by U.S. reviewers as a ‘marvellous neglected novel’, a ‘long-neglected masterpiece’, a ‘big black diamond of a book’ and ‘one of the superb novels of the 20th century’ (Rowley 241).

Stead took a markedly different course with *Letty Fox*, which she began in 1941. It was largely written in New York (Rowley 246, 282). Fittingly, as Birns notes, this was the city that W. H. Auden had described as ‘the great Rome/to all those who lost or hated home’ (*Contemporary Australian Literature* 44). In *Letty Fox*, Stead wrote her way into her adoptive city and country, a manner of writing which she continued in two more New York novels and then, after a move to the United Kingdom, *Cotter’s England* (1966), a novel of working-class England.¹³ Birns argues that the sequence of New York novels shows the way in which Stead was ‘secondarily localized’ and wrote ‘books that were more parochially anchored in a New York familiar to her intended reader.’ (*Contemporary Australian Literature* 42). By comparison, in a neat reversal, a repatriated

¹³ The other New York novels are *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* (1948) and *The People with the Dogs* (1952). The latter is Stead’s most affectionate portrait of the city. Edmund White named it as one of his favourite New York novels (‘Edmund White’s Top 10 New York Books’).

Patrick White was then turning from writing of the British in *The Living and The Dead* (1941) to portraying an Australian abroad in *The Aunt's Story* (1948).¹⁴

In *Letty Fox*, Stead writes about her adoptive city with relish and wit, satirising bourgeois families and the wartime marriage market. She kept cuttings from American media, entertained by their language, and mined the lives of William Blake's family (Rowley 172-3, 282). She cast Letty as a predator, a fox, who embarks upon the highly competitive pursuit of scarce eligible men. Life has made Letty a hardened realist; in an overcrowded city, she is prepared to use sharp dealings to get an apartment or a man. In the U.S., the novel was a *succès de scandale* and her bestselling book so far, selling over 12,000 copies (Moore 69).

Yet in the patriotic atmosphere after the war's end, many critics took exception to her portrayal of New York women. The *New York Times* accused her of 'serious misrepresentation' (Rowley 288; see also Harris, *The Magic Phrase* 13). Communists hated her depiction of ineffectual radicals. The *Saturday Review of Literature* was a contrary voice, declaring that the city had tens of thousands of Letty Foxes and if 'comfortable people' did not like the book, this was 'because [Stead] has touched too closely and too sharply the nerve centres where our conscience lies' (Rowley 288-89). Australian censors, alerted to the book's existence by critical reviews, banned its importation. As Nicole Moore has shown, the censors found Letty repellently 'oversexed' (75). Finding the sexual episodes implausible, they denied the book's merit as social critique. Needless to say, the early verdicts should not be taken as the last word, and recent

¹⁴ Most of White's subsequent novels were more Australian again. By contrast, his short story collections *The Burnt Ones* (1964) and *The Cockatoos* (1974) feature various settings and include many stories of expatriates, travellers and migrants.

readings of the novel have begun a fuller elucidation of its antecedents, formal qualities and themes.

In an essay on the rhetoric of luck and fortune in *Letty Fox*, Fiona Morrison touches on *Letty's* picaresque credentials and notes in particular its American antecedents in the form of narratives such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) (111). Birns identifies the novel as a synthesis of the picaresque with the *bildungsroman* and, in an argument that turns back to questions of place, goes on to show how Stead covertly evoked Australia within the text. In one example, the name of Letty's father, Solander Fox, recalls Daniel Solander, the botanist aboard Captain Cook's first *Endeavour* voyage (*Contemporary Australian Literature* 39, 42).¹⁵ Elsewhere, Birns has also touched on Stead's portrayal of politics in the book from her position as a 'Left woman satirist of the Left' ('Merely Unfriendly or Slightly Critical...'). Here I seek to build on these contributions by offering a more fleshed-out consideration of the novel's picaresque character, and by exploring, in the process, its distinctive cosmopolitanism.

2.2. The Origins of the Picaresque Novel: A Portrayal of Life 'Abroad'

The banning of *Letty Fox* by censors not coincidentally recalls the fate of the first-known picaresque novel, the anonymously-authored *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554). When it was first published in Madrid, it was banned by the Spanish crown (Alpert xxi). This serves to illustrate the subversive character of the picaresque from its beginnings. Although the word 'picaresque' is now sometimes used to describe any story that is

¹⁵ Birns similarly argues that Stead's late novel *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986), with its characters' search for a Platonically ideal – and impossible – socialist America, likewise refers back 'obliquely' to Australia ('Merely Unfriendly or Slightly Critical...').

freewheeling or episodic (or even just plotless), it originally meant a quite specific type of tale, which appeared in Reformation Europe at a time of loosening social strictures. It is the story not of a noble hero but of a wandering rogue, or *pícaro* in Spanish. In a first-person account that reads like a pseudo-autobiography, the low-born Lazarillo lives by his wits, going from town to indifferent town, master to brutal master – a blind man, a greedy priest, a seducing friar, a swindling salesman of papal indulgences, and so on.¹⁶

The book was unlike its precursors, tales of chivalric love. It set itself against such stories by depicting ‘a material profane world’ (Blaber and Gilman 20-21). Lazarillo is light-hearted, but his is a world disrupted: a rising middle class, together with the winds of the Reformation, Erasmian thought and incipient humanism, were bringing old pieties into question. ‘The *pícaro*,’ wrote Robert Alter, ‘determines to fend for himself partly because he is an individual who would not fit into the communal pattern in any case, but also because the weave of the pattern has begun to pull apart’ (51).¹⁷ *Lazarillo* became a highly-read book, going into multiple editions in other European cities and languages (Alpert xxi). Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1615), which is sometimes said to be the first novel, also has a picaresque irreverence, although with its satirical treatment of a noble quest it is more a mock romance.

In England, one translation of *Lazarillo* went into eight editions (Salzman 207). Many other picaresque narratives appeared in Europe, such as von Grimmelshausen’s *Adventures of a Simpleton* (1669) and Lesage’s *The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane* (1715). The latter was hugely popular for decades and shows how picaresque narratives

¹⁶ Lazarillo probably gets his name not from the better-known biblical Lazarus, famed for his resurrection in the gospel of John, but from the sore-riddled beggar in the book of Luke (Alter 2).

¹⁷ Alter’s *Rogue’s Progress: Studies in the Picaresque Novel* (1964) remains the best English-language guide to the topic.

discredited high ideals like justice: Gil Blas, when he is locked up by authorities, longs to be back in the captivity of the brutal *banditti*: ‘my innocence here will only be a passport to the galleys’ (Lesage 83). Tobias Smollett was a great populariser of the picaresque novel, producing translations (his version of *Gil Blas* went into ten editions) and writing *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) (Salzman 207; Ahern 332). Very early on there were also female protagonists, such as in Ubeda’s *La Pícaro Justina* (1605). Anthologists and scholars assigned them a minor place, however, insisting either on the maleness of the *pícaro* type or, in a criticism prefiguring one that was levelled at *Letty Fox*, finding tales of female rogues implausible reading (Ihrie 477-79).¹⁸

Picaresques fed into the ‘native rogue tradition’ of English storytelling – the jest-books and jest-biographies, tricks compendia, cony-catching pamphlets, criminal biographies, and travel literature of the time (Salzman, 202-206). This was a fluid time for the novel, which had not yet solidified as a form; Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, sometimes said to be the first English novel, was not published until 1719. Among other English picaresques, there were Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) and others centring on women, such as Defoe’s *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana, The Fortunate Mistress* (1724), as well as Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752). Charles Dickens’ early novels followed in this vein, from *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) through to *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1838).

To counter a misapprehension, these texts are not plotless; they have structure (a series of survival episodes) and rhythm, a Sisyphean effect within each episode whereby the *pícaro*

¹⁸ An analogy can be drawn with the figure of the flâneur. As Lauren Elkin has written, the flâneur has often been gendered as male and not female, but ‘[i]f we tunnel back, we find there was always a flâneuse passing Baudelaire in the street’ (Elkin 11).

is somehow set back again (Wicks 243-44). There is also a method to their satire. The *pícaro*'s double status, that of 'the outsider who has the knack of getting inside', allows for sympathetic satire – sympathetic because he is willing to satirise himself, because he 'recognizes himself as part of the fellowship of fools that comprise the human race' (Alter 23, 110). He sees his journey not as a pilgrimage or penance but as something to be welcomed, for 'underlying the picaresque world view is the conviction that while life is hard, life is also good' (Alter 68).

Picaresque narratives were also subversive in representing mobility, geographic as well as social. This was a time when sumptuary laws prohibited dressing up as one's betters (Doda 171-72), and when it was still necessary to cast around for an English word for domestic travel, 'travel' then generally being used to mean leaving the nation (McRae 236).¹⁹ A gradual shift can likewise be seen in the usage of 'abroad', which at first simply meant 'over a broad or wide area', then came to mean the world outside one's home and, later, overseas ('abroad, adj.', *OED*). Picaresque narratives showed people breaking the rules by going abroad, donning disguises and subverting the social order in amusing ways. They represent a low literature: these are stories not of Benjamin's seafaring merchants but of talented nobodies. The picaresque can thus be seen as an oppositional mode, a contrarian impulse in the history of the novel.

2.3. Letty Fox as a 'New York Girl' and *Pícaro*

¹⁹ In 1641, for example, John Taylor, a Thames waterman and poet, tried to get at what he meant by referring to his 'travell, Joruney [sic], Voyage, Perambulation, and Perigrination, or what you please to call it' (McRae 220).

Picaresque narratives evoke the possibilities and struggles of life abroad, in all senses. The picaresque was also an apt choice for America, a country that saw itself as casting off shibboleths and rewarding the brave for their individual resourcefulness. As Morrison observes in the notes to her essay:

The American picaresque is sourced in Alexis de Tocqueville and associated with Washington Irving's *Knickerbocker's History of New York* (1809); Herman Melville *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857); Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873), *Innocents Abroad* (1869); J. W. Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). [sic] (120)

Huckleberry Finn made a lasting impression on Stead, who read it in childhood and loved Huck for 'his peripatetic observing, satirizing, efforts to survive, his resilience, pragmatism, and humour' (Morrison 120).

Stead's novel shows the influence of these American examples as well as the earlier European ones; even the name Letty Fox is suggestive of her grab-bag of influences. She picked the surname 'Fox', liking the bawdiness of its proximity to 'Luck' (Rowley 246). It was borrowed from the real-life Ralph Fox, a man Stead loved who died fighting Franco's forces in the Spanish Civil War. The name makes Letty a trickster, recalling Reynard the Fox, a fixture of tales of medieval northern Europe (Morrison 120). The animalistic note also recalls old cony-catching tales, 'cony-catching' being Elizabethan slang for theft through trickery, and the animal tricksters of native American lore (Haase 965).²⁰ For Stead the fox also represents sexual desire. As Letty says at one point of the torments of desire, 'this fox was tearing at my vitals' (342).

Stead sets her Fox loose in Manhattan, 'the great Metropolis of Get-By' (487). This is a fitting setting for a *pícaro*. As Lauren Elkin has written:

²⁰ In native American traditions, the best-known trickster is the coyote. Foxes figure prominently in Japanese folktales, as the shapeshifting *kitsune* spirit-beings that trick or seduce humans.

. . . it's the centre of cities where women have been empowered, by plunging into the heart of them, and walking where they're not meant to. Walking where other people (men) walk without eliciting comment. That is the transgressive act. (Elkin 22)

In Manhattan, as in Lazarillo's Spain, '[e]verybody uses the *burla*, or deceit' (Alpert 39). Letty is 'sharp and self-seeking', to borrow Alter's description of Gil Blas (25), and her first-person tale has all the picaresque essentials: a roguish protagonist, a portrayal of everyday life and the struggle to get by, episodic movement or adventure, and the eschewal of ideals and sentimentality. Here is the frank, confessional way in which she opens her story:

One hot night last spring, after waiting fruitlessly for a call from my then lover, with whom I had quarrelled the same afternoon, and finding one of my black moods on me, I flung out of my room on the ninth floor (unlucky number) in a hotel in lower Fifth Avenue and rushed into the streets of the Village, feeling bad. My first thought was, at any cost, to get company for the evening. (Stead 3)

In Stead's handling, the picaresque is likewise a story of life abroad in the widest sense: this is an undomestic life, in which Letty's first act is to go out into the street. After an unstable upbringing in which she was tossed from relative to relative, Letty flits from lodging to lodging, prospect to prospect. She is constantly abroad on the streets of New York – walking, taking the subway, frequenting bars. She refuses to know her (domestic) place: she is put out when returned veterans challenge her right to do as she has always done. With an old schoolfriend at one bar, she is abused by men for rejecting their advances: 'Then what are you here for?' they sneer (476). Letty feels 'blue' at such incidents but carries on as best she can.

What kind of hero – or anti-hero – is Letty Fox? In her own estimation, she is 'hardy, enterprising, and optimistic' (487). This is brought out by the contrast with her sister ('high-minded, full of poetry ... prim ... [goes] in for metaphysics': 225, 256). She embarks on what in different hands might have been a romantic quest: the search for a man to marry. Yet Letty pursues marriage not as a state of completion but as a pragmatic

means – a condition – of survival. She works in a string of jobs while thinking of writing. She is not born to greatness; she does not go off to war. Living her life in episodes, she brings to mind Auerbach's description of the heroes found in Homer, men who 'wake every morning as if it were the first day of their lives' (12). Letty does in fact compare herself to the Greeks. Writing to a fiancé fighting in the Civil War in Spain, Letty imagines joining him, then goes on to warn, 'Don't pull your cold, superior Oxford airs on me, Clays; I am just a fiery, gallant person, given a chance, and I suppose, the Hectors and Achilles-es, were like me, only more so' (271).²¹

Like *pícaros* and *pícaras* before her, Letty is in some respects a sympathetic rogue. She may dissemble, but she is not depraved like her cousin Edwige. She is generous and good-humoured. 'The truth is, I am weak,' she writes without melancholy. 'I love people and am not sure enough of my own virtue to criticize others; this is the best fruit of vice!' (255-56). As Morrison says, comparing Letty to Moll Flanders: 'Like Moll, she is a good-willed libertine and a minor swindler who is focused on pragmatic survival over romance or sensibility' (111). Whereas some have doubted Moll's picaresque character – she does not 'rejoice in her rogueries,' in Alter's objection (46) – there can be no doubting Letty's. Perhaps that was what partly made Letty so objectionable to post-war New Yorkers and the Australian censors, however. Angela Carter saw her as full of bad faith and a 'heartless betrayer' (Carter 257). It is rare for women in fiction, bad though they might be, to enjoy their badness as Letty does.

²¹ As for her sense of her place in history, we know Letty to be a Marxist, and in theory this would commit her to historical materialism – the idea that societies evolve inexorably toward late capitalism and revolution – but it is easy to imagine her agreeing with the quip that history is just one damn thing after another, as the British historian Arnold Toynbee is supposed to have said.

Then there are her politics. Like Lazarillo with the priesthood, Letty pulls no punches. As well as revealing the vanities of bourgeois New Yorkers, she shows up the vacuity of the ineffectual Left, for whom Marxism might as well be a new opiate. Her views contrast with those of Felix Krull, Thomas Mann's picaresque creation (his novel *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man* came out eight years after *Letty Fox*, in 1954). Asked if he is a socialist, Felix gives the reply of every social climber ever: 'Certainly not, Herr Generaldirektor! I find society charming just the way it is, and I am burning to win its favour.'²²

Letty isn't quite so charmed, but as a realist she makes her way in the world as it is. According to Morrison, this is the key to understanding Stead's view of New York in the text. It is a European Marxist critique of America: a lot of new-world energy, but no clear long-term program to bring about social change. For Morrison, the rhetoric of luck is actually the rhetoric of alienation, here used in the Marxist sense:

Letty's 'fortune' or 'misfortune' is to be beholden to Fortuna and its wonderful rhetorical richness because she cannot or will not subscribe to or support a theoretical system that would stop the capitalist wheel of chance and its distorting effect on both personal desires and political economy. (119)

This brings us to the ending, which is often a problem for a picaresque novel. As Blaber and Gilman rightly note, an episodic story has no *telos*, or ultimate aim (23). Letty has no purpose except to live, enjoy, survive. A fox has no *telos* except being a fox. How do you end a story whose point is experience, variety, episode after episode? Lazarillo ended his adventures by finding a wife, who in a final joke turned out to be a cheat. Letty marries Bill van Week, a divorcé a few times over. It is an eyes-wide-open ending, not a happily-ever-after. Letty says:

²² "Nicht doch, Herr Generaldirektor! Ich finde die Gesellschaft reizend, so wie sie ist, und brenne darauf, ihre Gunst zu gewinnen". The translation is Robert Alter's (126).

I was not always honest, but I had grit, pretty much; what else is there to it? The principal thing is, I got a start in life; and it's from now on. I have freight, I cast off, the journey has begun. (517)

Letty treats marriage like getting a passport, a necessary permit to go on living in the world.

2.4. Reverence Revived: The Picaresque Novel in the National Literatures of Australia and the United States

For comparison, it is worth considering how *Letty Fox* sits alongside Australian picaresque narratives. In Australian fiction, the wandering rogue has long been a recognisable type. The *pícaro*'s ingenuity and 'adventurer's capitalism' (Alter 46) captivated the sort of person who went out to the colonies.²³ Convict fiction had elements of the picaresque, and later stories and novels drew self-consciously on the genre, from Henry Lawson's Steelman sketches of the 1890s to Joseph Furphy's *Such Is Life* (1903), with its famous opening line: 'Unemployed at last!' (Blaber and Gilman 33-35). Furphy, a former bankrupt, made his novel of bullock drivers, squatters and vagrants a shaggy-dog story, writing against the conventions of the romantic epic and smuggling in allusions to cross-dressing and homosexuality. Blaber and Gilman place novels like Kylie Tennant's *The Battlers* (1941), Peter Mathers' novels of the 1970s and Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985) in this tradition; they might equally have mentioned Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901).

²³ Matthew Flinders, the first voyager to circumnavigate the Australian landmass, wrote of being 'induced to go to sea against the wishes of my friends from reading *Robinson Crusoe*' (Estensen 5), and, as Robert Alter puts it: 'the picaroon is a parallel, within society, to Robinson Crusoe, outside of it' (123).

Yet what begins as irreverent can solidify into something else as new pieties creep in. Take the unconventional Sybylla Melvyn of *My Brilliant Career*. She does not want to settle down ('the sweetest thing is motion': Franklin 384). She delights in tricking men by posing as a servant. She claims to be unsentimental, no more cut out for deference than she is for romance:

Nothing would induce me to show more respect to an appraiser of the runs than to a boundary-rider, or to a clergyman than a drover. I am the same to this day. My organ of veneration must be flatter than a pancake, because to venerate a person simply for his position I never did or will. To me the Prince of Wales will be no more than a shearer, unless when I meet him he displays some personality apart from his princeship – otherwise he can go hang. (8)

The novel's plot is unromantic in that Sybylla ends her career (or at least the novel) with a failed courtship and without the security of wealth. Yet Franklin has her heroine close her story with a great romantic burst about Australia. 'I am proud that I am an Australian,' she declares, before going on for two pages about the 'mighty bush' and her sunburnt brothers and sisters who weather fire and flood and drought, in a eulogy to what she sees as the country's receding egalitarianism.²⁴ This is its own sort of reverence, here for the bush and its ethos. This tendency reappeared in Carey's much later *Illywhacker*, a novel that deliberately returned to the bush and a bygone time. Herbert Badgery, a self-declared trickster and confidence man, is also very much a dreamer, more a Don Quixote than a Lazarillo. Badgery is all for nationalism and egalitarianism; he does not reveal, by his adventures, the failures of these ideals. It is a picaresque, but it is a romp and nothing more, a *wunderkammer* that threatens nothing and no one.

²⁴ 'The great sun is sinking in the west, grinning and winking knowingly as he goes, upon the starving stock and drought-smitten wastes of land. Nearer he draws to the gum-tree scrubby horizon, turns the clouds to orange, scarlet, silver flame, gold! Down, down he goes. The gorgeous, garish splendour of sunset pageantry flames out; the long shadows eagerly cover all; the kookaburras laugh their merry mocking good-night; the clouds fade to turquoise, green, and grey; the stars peep shyly out; the soft call of the mopoke arises in the gullies! With much love and good wishes to all — Good night! Good-bye!' (390-92).

A further point of comparison for *Letty Fox* is the social realist novel of itinerant life in the late 1930s and early 1940s. For example, in 1940, Kylie Tennant's *The Battlers* (1941) shared *The Bulletin's* literary prize with another manuscript in the social realist vein, Eve Langley's *The Pea-Pickers* (1942). Appearing as it did in the same decade as *Letty Fox*, Tennant's novel is a useful comparison. Tennant travelled as an unemployed itinerant worker during the Depression years, lived in Aboriginal communities and visited prisons. In writing about the lives of Depression-era drifters, she put stories of survival front and centre; the atmosphere is grim rather than picaresque. Tennant's work has a documentary character, recording the social history of the underclass. Stead reviewed the book favourably for the *New Masses*. She treated it as – and even called it – ‘reportage’ (Stead, ‘Wandering Workers’).

This suggestive survey brings into focus what Stead did differently in *Letty Fox*: she refused both the heroic mode and romantic nationalism. She refused the putative tasks of the sort of national literature that asserts and upholds national values. Nor did she offer the sort of documentary fiction that she described as ‘reportage’.

How does the novel sit among North American picaresques? This was where Stead had hung out her shingle and where the closest comparisons can be made. As noted above, Stead was enamoured of Twain and was in turn admired by Bellow, author of the great picaresque American novel *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). Bellow reportedly once said he thought Stead should have won the Nobel Prize over him.²⁵ It is not known whether he read *Letty Fox* before he wrote *Augie March*, which he began in the late Forties and published in 1953. Because his novel opens in the Thirties, it is easy to think

²⁵ This nugget is routinely trotted out about Stead (e.g. Rowley 455), but since it is cited without a source it is hard to be sure it is not apocryphal.

of it as the earlier book, but it came out seven years later. The books are alike in their debt to Twain and European picaresques. Among many similarities, Augie is like Letty in sharing Lazarillo's spirit, embracing the idiom of the city (in his case, Chicago), and relying on his own luck and pluck. He lives by his wits and has affairs with oddball women. He is a character who will not stay in his place, or rather the place assigned to him as a Jewish-American boy from an immigrant neighbourhood.

Augie March has since been hailed by many as a (or even the) Great American Novel. Christopher Hitchens thought it beat out *The Great Gatsby* to the title, representing a sort of mission statement of the American dream, having come to stand for the idea that America is a nation of immigrants (Hitchens viii). This should not obscure the boldly radical intent of Augie's opening claim, 'I am an American, Chicago-born...' (Bellow 3: It might be surmised that Bellow would not mind his creation being conscripted for national service in this way, as he tried to sign up for the U.S. armed forces in World War II, and was disappointed when he was turned away. The problem was one of citizenship: it was only then that Bellow discovered he was an illegal immigrant, born in Québec). It bears remembering that Augie first appeared as an interloper, and Bellow's achievement is such that his character can never be truly co-opted for the purpose of burnishing a national self-image.

It can be argued that in America, too, the picaresque novel solidified in ways that reflected new cultural gods and new kinds of reverence. After Bellow's novel, the open road assumed its iconic place in the American imagination, and 'picaresque' came to refer broadly to road novels and films (Sherrill 32-33). Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957) was hailed as picaresque, for example. Often these stories were cast as quest (or anti-quest)

narratives, as in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* (1971) with its fitting subtitle, 'A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream'. Recent novels in this line likewise combine a love of fast vehicles and picaresque adventure, like Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013). The story of a young artist, Reno, who is also a motorcycle racer, it tells of high-octane adventures in the art world of the Seventies. These narratives are much further removed from the origins of the picaresque, and far removed as well from the world of *Letty Fox*.

2.5. Conclusion

What, then, does *Letty Fox* suggest about the possibilities of expatriate fiction? In its choice and treatment of its subject matter, it shows, in Birns' phrase, Stead being 'secondarily localized' as a writer. At the same time, it also shows a distinctive literary cosmopolitanism which Stead, as a Europeanised Australian living in New York, brought to bear on the writing of the novel. In writing *Letty Fox* as a picaresque, she drew on a subversive, satirical tradition of early European picaresques, as well as American texts such as *Huckleberry Finn*, to evoke a life lived 'abroad'.

In Letty's case, this is a single woman's undomestic life 'abroad' in Manhattan, but more obliquely the text also suggests the condition of living abroad in the modern sense, the 'shifty life' Stead knew as an expatriate. Not least, the novel shows Stead problematising notions of the nation, home and belonging, particularly as they relate to women. When the servicemen come home, Letty is faced, to her dismay, with the prospect of belonging less, not more. The nation may be saved, and with it the freedoms of the populace, but

the immediate result for Letty is that her own rights to walk and to go to her usual haunts are challenged and denied, or taken to be conditional upon obliging men.

To borrow Elkin's description of Virginia Woolf and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Stead's depiction of Letty 'forces us to confront the ways in which word like home and belonging are used against women' (Elkin 22). With its demand, 'Then what are you here for?', the novel prompts us to ask whose country – and whose freedom – was defended in the war. It is now often observed that, when the war ended, American women were urged to 'return' to the home and domesticity to provide jobs for servicemen (McEuen, 'Women, Gender, and World War II'). In an indication of the aspirations of female workers (polls of whom showed that most wanted to remain in the paid workforce), this effort largely failed (McEuen, *Making War, Making Women* 206-12). In Australia, where there was a similar push, there was a brief drop in the total number of employed women, but by 1948 their numbers had risen above the wartime peak (Beaton 87).

Stead's exploration of the politics of urban space was especially prescient for its time. The post-war ordering (and re-ordering) of urban space is still being felt and analysed, not only with respect to gender but also regarding race. In the U.S., there were concerted attempts to deny opportunities to African Americans, including veterans: while the G.I. Bill of Rights poured billions of dollars into a series of programs for returned soldiers, concessions won by southern states meant that African-American veterans received significantly less help than their white counterparts – with profound consequences for access to new suburban housing and the use of urban space.²⁶ In Australia, too, the war

²⁶ In New York and northern New Jersey, for example, 'fewer than 100 of the 67,000 mortgages insured by the G.I. Bill supported home purchases by nonwhites' (Katznelson 140). Developers also fostered a white suburban middle class: on Long Island, the popular suburban 'Levittown' houses that were sold

service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians received little public acknowledgement, and it has been argued that both the wartime experience and the post-war deafness to calls for civic equality hastened the emergence of black radicalism (Hall 190-91). In the case of both women and African Americans in the U.S., attempts at containment would ultimately fail. *Letty Fox* presages a refusal to be contained: in portraying the lot of women and Letty in particular, it ends not with a retreat into domesticity, but a sense of opening outwards and a new beginning: ‘I have freight, I cast off, the journey has begun’ (Stead, *Letty Fox* 517).

Some nuance is called for in theorising the novel’s cosmopolitanism. The book was born of Stead’s conviction that she could write about wherever she happened to live, because she belonged wherever she happened to live, but this was also at least in part a cosmopolitanism of necessity. Stead and Blake were in New York because they had had to leave Europe, and Stead’s turn to a ‘more parochially anchored’ fiction of New York also reflected pragmatic commercial necessities (Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature* 42). But there is also much exuberance and relish in the book, and it suggests a Stead who recalls Alter’s description of the *pícaro* as ‘an outsider who has the knack of getting inside’ (Alter 110).

Sometimes the trickster is a stand-in for the writer of fiction: we might say that Letty Fox was to Christina Stead as Felix Krull was to Thomas Mann. The confidence man or woman has a knack for living that some writers might envy, the talent for doing in the world what a writer does on the page. We find a recognition of this yearning in Calvino’s memos, when he writes that he takes as his patron the god Mercury ‘with his winged feet,

cheaply to veterans came with a contractual cause forbidding buyers from renting their homes to African Americans (Elkin 27).

light and airborne, astute, agile, adaptable, free and easy', even though he knows he is really more like Saturn, 'melancholy, contemplative, solitary' (*Six Memos* 52). Letty was the Mercury to Stead's saturnine self. She was also Stead's way into New York, her way of sorting out what to make of the city. As Calvino said in an earlier lecture, fiction is not primarily about what the author knows, but stems from the desire for knowledge: 'the urge for writing is always connected with the longing for something one would like to possess and master, something that escapes us.' (Calvino, 'The Written and the Unwritten Word' 39)

In one sense at least, *Letty Fox* is of its time. It is an overstuffed novel, a holdover from an age in which novelists tried to squeeze everything in, the entirety of a social world. With all its sharply-drawn insights into the city's economy, it shows no regard for economies of style. It brings to mind the story of Tolstoy waking at night, horrified to realise he had forgotten to mention yachting in *Anna Karenina* (1877). We might ask of Stead's novels, as Nicholas Jose has asked of Patrick White's, whether we want art that big (Jose, 'Auto Da Fé'). Both authors wrote sprawling novels, books that are big on ambition and ideas. Their plots sometimes unspool over years. And they are long: Clifton Fadiman, the *New Yorker* reviewer and Stead's editor at Simon & Schuster, advised her to rein things in. She disdained his advice (Rowley 208).

For all the appeal of the picaresque novel as a mode of writing of life abroad, however, in appraising the form I have come to see certain limitations, too, particularly in the changelessness of its roguish characters. If the changelessness of a *pícaro* begins to feel unsatisfying, and if stories like these begin to seem plotless, that is because the main trajectory of the novel has taken a different direction since the picaresque first sprang up.

The novel since Dostoyevsky is more often the psychological novel, in which inner struggles of character are the headline affair. In particular, as F. R. Leavis argued in *The Great Tradition* (1948), it is the exploration of moral dilemmas that makes the novel a central form. But there are few profound psychological struggles or moral dilemmas in the adventures of Letty or Augie, whose stories subscribe to an archaic view of the fixity of character. As the latter says, crediting Heraclitus, ‘a man’s character is his fate’ (Bellow 3). The counter-idea, that of the possibility of reinventing the self, is one I will come back to in Chapter 3.

A reader’s expectation now – my expectation now – is that a character will undergo some sort of change. The exception that proves the rule is the tragically flawed hero who perceives his or her flaw too late: the Emma Bovarys of fiction. If more recent attempts at the picaresque mode feel like they are lacking, this may be in part because we have come to want something else from novels. It sounds trite to spell this out, but it goes to the heart of Stead’s great American anti-romance. This is why Letty Fox is a changeless Homeric hero, and why in the end she is unredeemed. She learns no lessons except the one she already knows: that it’s every man, every woman, every fox for itself.

3. Opportunities and Costs in Mavis Gallant's Early Short Stories 'Travellers Must Be Content' and 'The Cost of Living'

3.1. Introduction: Gallant's Early Stories and the Outsider in the Frame

This chapter turns from Stead's *Letty Fox* to two of Mavis Gallant's early short stories, 'Travellers Must Be Content' (1959) and 'The Cost of Living' (1962). Whereas in novels like *Letty Fox* Stead wrote of New Yorkers in New York, Gallant's choice in many of her stories was to write of expatriates – to put the outsider in the frame. From the mid-twentieth century, Gallant wrote dozens of stories about the restless characters of her time and milieu: expatriates, drifters, post-war refugees and others. A comparison with *Letty Fox* yields both commonalities and departures. Stylistically, Gallant's stories could not be further from a sprawling picaresque novel; they are models of economy, enigmatic, not exhaustive. They share in the picaresque tendency to be unromantic and unsettling, but, as this chapter will argue, they depict mobility in quite a different manner.

A brief explanation is needed for this turn from the picaresque novel to the short story. Having initially contemplated writing a picaresque novel, I became dissatisfied with my early drafts. And, as I argued in Chapter 2, I felt the irreverent potential of the picaresque narrative had given way to novels that read like period pieces or experiments in pastiche, or offered a restrictively static model of characterisation. I decided to work instead on some short stories. These were mostly about young or youngish people who were characters 'abroad', either in the original sense of being at large or away from home, or in the modern sense of being in another country. They were Stead's Nietzschean wanderers, but not exactly triumphant figures. Most had spent their adult lives, as I have,

in the 2000s, an era that opened with September 11, 2001 and the beginning of an unending War on Terror, and that continued with the widening ripple-like effects of the 2008 global recession and the emergence of the gig economy. I began to think of a book that derived its scope and movement not from a single picaresque life, but from a number of characters in a collection of stories.

This pivot – toward short stories, toward ‘The Expatriates’ – brings me to the subject of this chapter. Mavis Gallant, an expatriate writer *par excellence*, was a masterful and prolific writer of short stories. As this chapter will argue, her stories present an unvarnished view of expatriate life. They show two sides of the same coin: her characters’ hopes of escape and transformation (Section 3.2), as well as the costs that attach to their choices (Section 3.3). Like any decision, the decision to live abroad brings opportunities and costs, a conjunction that brings to mind the concept of an ‘opportunity cost’ in economics: the opportunity cost of a decision or action is ‘the loss of other alternatives when one alternative is chosen’ (‘opportunity, n.’, OED). Gallant paid close attention to the economies of lives lived abroad, taking a keen interest in the workings of money. Economy figures in these stories as an aspect of character and setting (Section 3.3.1), a marker of the costs that choices carry (Section 3.3.2), and, stylistically, an expression of the elisions and silences of loss and estrangement (Section 3.3.3). Yet for all that mobility is a site of ambivalence in the texts, so too are the notions of home and belonging.

The stories considered here, ‘Travellers Must Be Content’ and ‘The Cost of Living’, first appeared in *The New Yorker*. They were collected in a 2009 edition of Gallant’s early stories under the title *The Cost of Living*, with an introduction by Jhumpa Lahiri.²⁷ More

²⁷ ‘Travellers Must Be Content’ appeared in *The New Yorker* on 11 July 1959, ‘The Cost of Living’ on 3 March 1962. References are to the 2009 edition.

than half of the twenty stories in the collection, which span the years 1951–1971, are about expatriates, and most of the characters are adrift in some way. Many are North Americans abroad in a post-war Europe still occupied by the U.S. military. There are English pension-keepers on the Mediterranean coast and Germans washed up in Paris and elsewhere, ill at ease in their new lives and yet unable to go home.

These early stories appeared in the *New Yorker* at a time when it ‘spoke directly to [a] new class of cosmopolitans’, according to Mary Corey’s history of the magazine’s post-war years (Corey 5). By the end of the 1940s, ten per cent of its readers resided abroad (Corey 12). Some will have been foreign subscribers, but some will also have been Hannerz’s accidental expatriates working for foreign corporate offices (243), and still others will have been the new internationalists – the correspondents, diplomats and aid workers of expanding international organisations, including the United Nations – who appear in the stories of the Australian-born author Shirley Hazzard, another *New Yorker* contributor. The magazine spoke to these readers, but it also reflected a changing world for the edification of readers at home, whether they were wealthy Manhattanites, housewives isolated in bedroom communities, or clerical workers living in small towns. In 1959, when ‘Travellers’ was published, housewives made up more than half of the *New Yorker*’s regular readers (Corey 11). Gallant’s stories appeared among reported articles, New York theatre listings and luxury advertisements, a heterogeneous mix of entertainment and edification.

The early stories point the way to continuing preoccupations: attention to characters adrift continued in Gallant’s later work with the collections *In Transit* (1988) and *Varieties of Exile* (2003). In the *Collected Stories*, there are stories of Canada, Spain, Switzerland,

Germany, Russia, the Riviera and especially Paris. As Hermione Lee wrote in a survey of a later edition, ‘Refugees, emigres, converts, divorcees, orphans, survivors of appalling wars, the wilfully homeless and the emotionally displaced pour through her pages’ (Lee, ‘Lost In Transit’). Then there are the French, who as Lahiri has written appear over time more and more on their own terms rather than through foreigners’ eyes (Lahiri xii). There are sharply-observed absurdities of French manners, as in the story ‘Rue de Lille’ (1983): ‘You can’t ask for a divorce at lunch. It has to be done by mail’ (Gallant, *Collected Stories* 820). There are stories that look back to Canada, like the Linnet Muir stories in *Home Truths*. Yet the drifters, who came first, never go away.

In looking beyond Canada’s shores, Gallant’s body of work stands in contrast to, and has inevitably been compared with, the stories of Alice Munro with their dedicated regionalism and ‘rural epiphanies’ (Baeyer 194). At their most basic, Gallant’s and Munro’s different approaches stand for two competing ideas of the *topos*, or place, of the short story, with a transient internationalism on the one hand and a tightly-focused regionalism on the other (see e.g. Ondaatje vii). In opting for the former, Gallant has been compared to earlier expatriate writers like Henry James (Keefer 2, 11; it should be noted that Munro has also set the odd story outside of Ontario, like ‘The Jack Randa Hotel’ (1993), which takes place in Brisbane). It has long been remarked that Gallant was not received in Canada in the same way Munro has been (Skelton Grant 10). More recently, however, the two authors have been considered alongside each other as scholars begin to read across differences of setting for common themes such as grief and identity (see e.g. Smythe; Sturgess).

In turning her gaze on outsiders, Gallant was very much writing from her own time, when fiction showed a particular attention to exiles, outcasts and strangers (Muratore 126). A contrast can be drawn between Gallant and earlier authors like Stead, who was intellectually a product of the 1930s (Ackland 18). Between the two World Wars, writers were a travel-happy lot. ‘Sacred to [the post-World War I] generation’, wrote Paul Fussell, ‘is the image not just of the traveller but of the wanderer, the vagabond, or even Chaplin’s cinema tramp, all skilled in the techniques of shrewd evasion and makeshift appropriate to the age’s open road’ (57). Fussell’s traveling writers – and his book contains pages and pages of their names – disdained borders in principle (31). On Corfu in 1936, it was possible for Lawrence Durrell, writing home for news, to ask: ‘IS THERE NO ONE WRITING AT ALL IN ENGLAND NOW?’ (Fussell 11, original emphasis)

With her idea of the voyage to Cythera, Stead was of that earlier generation. Gallant had no such myth, redemptive or otherwise. It might be asked what had become of the energy, the irreverence, of the picaresque tale. In the aftermath of the war, picaresque lives had a dystopic quality, and such joys as they had were of a cracked, grim-throated sort. An example is Oskar Matzerath, Günter Grass’s creation in *The Tin Drum* (1959): a shrieking, stunted man who keeps company with dwarves and gangsters through the war and afterwards makes a living engraving tombstones and drumming. There are some of these characters in Gallant’s stories too: in ‘Willi’ (1963), a former POW turned actor in Paris advises French film-makers about the Occupation (Gallant). War and Holocaust films are already all the rage, and just about everyone Willi knows is a B-grade actor who goes about re-enacting the war’s worst episodes. This is not to say that idealistic, adventurous and expansive imaginings of mobile lives were not being written: Julio Cortázar’s

Hopscotch (1963) is a notable counterexample, although here we also find mental disintegration in the story of the Argentine intellectual Horacio Oliveira.

Gallant worked at the Montreal *Standard* as a reporter through the War. At its end, she saw the first images of the concentration camps to be circulated, and was asked to write a report explaining them (Hancock 39). For long afterwards she was exercised by the question of fascism's societal origins (Hancock 40). She belonged to a generation for whom travel and wandering and rootlessness were ineradicably bound up with massive social dislocations, the movements of troops and refugees and the long shadow of wartime horrors. This consciousness existed in tension with, or was perhaps transmuted into, the dynamism, idealism and sense of the potential for social progress that animates Hazzard's characters, as well as much else to be found in the *New Yorker* – and American culture – at the time (Corey xi-xii). Nevertheless, states of estrangement were typical in Gallant's stories. As Hermione Lee wrote of the *Collected Stories*:

That passion for disengagement, combined with loss and homesickness, are personal themes. And [Gallant] knows very well that writing, 'all this business of putting life through a sieve and then discarding it', is 'another variety of exile'. (Lee, 'Lost In Transit')

More specifically, among the recent burgeoning literature on Gallant, Jakob von Baeyer goes further by examining Gallant's distinctive cosmopolitanism. In writing about the stories 'In Youth Is Pleasure' (1975) and 'The Ice Wagon Going Down The Street' (1963), von Baeyer finds 'a spectrum of representation and experience, from euphoric visions of shared humanity to more complex pictures of global citizenship' (187). In contrast to the often hopeful character of much cosmopolitan thought, which aspires to a condition of shared humanity, Gallant's stories represent 'a much lonelier proposition' (189). Building

on this recognition, the focus here is on two early stories which offer specific evocations of expatriate states.

3.1.1 'Travellers Must Be Content'

In 'Travellers Must Be Content,' published in the summer of 1959, Gallant tells the story of vain, confected Wishart.²⁸ Born into poverty and privation in a class-bound England, he now masquerades as an English gentleman in America, where he works for most of the year as a drama teacher at an unremarkable preparatory school. His deceptions hinge on his expatriate status; he is smart enough to know the limits of what he can carry off. Every summer, he travels to exotic locales abroad where he throws himself on the hospitality of a succession of middle-aged women friends who will pay for his flattery and companionship. Wrongly taking him to be gay, they view him as 'the symbolic male, who would never cause "trouble"' (159).

As the traveller of the title, Wishart has travelled far from his roots, his relations, and his class. His childhood poverty is mentioned as a 'burning fact' (159). Having reinvented himself, he lives in fear that the edifice might crumble at any moment. Even his name is not his own:

That is, it was not the name that had been gummed onto his personality some forty years before without thought or care; 'Wishart' was selected, like all the pieces of his fabricated life. Even the way he looked was contrived, and if, on bad days, he resembled nothing so much as a failed actor afflicted with dreams, he accepted this resemblance, putting it down to artistic fatigue. He did not consider himself a failed anything. Success can only be measured in terms of distance traveled, and in Wishart's case it had been a long flight. (157)

²⁸ The story is one of four that together became the novel *Green Water, Green Sky*, which was published in the same year (see Skelton Grant 38).

Gallant is striking an artfully playful note; the expression of the story's title comes from *As You Like It* (Act 2, Scene 4), Shakespeare's comedy of love and disguises.²⁹ The difficulties of Wishart's life are handled lightly, as if they mean no more to him than they would to an actor:

He had lived one of society's most gruelling roles, the escape from an English slum . . . 'Scramble, scrape and scholarship' should have been written on his brow, and, inside balloons emerging from his brain, 'a talent for accents' and 'a genius for kicking the past from his shoes. (157)

This is economical in the extreme, and the humorous touch invites the reader to suspend any sympathy for the man, who in any case appears to be doing fine. We learn nothing of his real (as opposed to his invented) parents, just that '[t]he only person out of the real past he remembered without loathing was a sister, Glad, who had become a servant at eleven and had taught him how to eat with a knife and fork' (158).

The story begins as Wishart meets his American friend, Mrs Bonnie McCarthy, a society divorcée, in Cannes. He finds his friend and the French town charming: they reflect his success. The only irksome thing is the presence of Bonnie's daughter, Flor. Twenty-four and single, feeling countryless and adrift, Flor has been dragged about for years since her parents' divorce. In Cannes, she finds a suitor, Bob Harris, whom Bonnie and Wishart take pleasure in despising.

The crisis comes when Wishart takes Bonnie to mean that *he* should marry Flor. Flummoxed rather than attracted by this idea, he tells his friend, 'It won't do' (179). Only then does he grasp his mistake: far from suggesting him as a match for her daughter, Bonnie has never believed in his invented self:

²⁹ 'Ay, now I am in Arden, the more fool I. When I was at home, I was in a better place, but travellers must be content' (see Ondaatje vi).

He had believed that the exact miniature he saw in her sunglasses was the Wishart she accepted, the gentleman he had glimpsed in the store window that first day. He had thought that the inflection of a voice, the use of some words, established them as a kind. But Bonnie had never believed in the image. She had never considered him anything but jumped-up. He now remembered that she had never let him know her family back home, had never suggested he meet her brothers. (179)

Having made a transgression, Wishart knows he must push off. Even in the immediate aftermath of his gaffe, however, he is mentally rehearsing witticisms for his next hostess elsewhere: ‘The shrieking children of butchers were being taught to swim’ (180). This is a mark either of his emotional stuntedness or, from another perspective, his professionalism, for he knows very well that the serial guest must be entertaining.

Leaving at dawn the next day, Wishart takes a bus to Grasse. On the bus, he thinks again – dreams? daydreams? – of Glad, and of himself as a child on the day she left to go into service. The genuine sadness of this moment is the surprise of the story. The reader briefly sees the great, authentic grief of Wishart’s life, a sadness so great that he cannot allow it to exist:

He took good care not to dream, and when the bus drew in at Grasse, under the trees, and he saw his new, straw-thin hostess (chignon, espadrilles, peasant garden hat), he did not look like a failed actor assailed with nightmares but a smooth and pleasant schoolmaster whose sleep is so deep that he never dreams at all. (184)

The answer is to deny his own dream, to stay awake and on his guard.

3.1.2 ‘*The Cost of Living*’

‘The Cost of Living’ came three years later, in 1962. A longer story, and one that is harder to reduce to its parts, it revolves around two Australian sisters in Paris. The narrator, thirty-three-year-old Puss, has scraped by in Paris for six years giving piano lessons and living in a squalid Left Bank hotel. She left Australia at twenty-seven, the same age at

which Gallant left Montreal: ‘It happened that at the late age of twenty-seven I had run away from home. High time, you might say; but rebels can’t always be choosers’ (Gallant, *The Cost of Living* 202).

Puss does not appear to be having a great time: she works without papers for low pay, and implies in passing that she knows about ‘hurting and being hurt’ (226). She does not consider leaving, but wonders instead why others do not leave: ‘The whitish sky and the evil Paris roofs and the cold red sun suggested a destiny so final that I wondered why everyone did not rebel or run away’ (214). Puss is going nowhere, and she is not the only one: ‘I saw that everyone in this hotel was as tainted, as stationary, as I was myself, and I knew we were tainted with the same incompetence’ (214). She has recently been joined by her older sister, Louise. Also living in the hotel are two impoverished French actors: Patrick, who briefly becomes Louise’s lover, and the impetuous Sylvie (more actors, more made-up names: ‘Patrick’ is a stage name, we learn).

Puss tells the story, but because it is so full of omissions and self-deceptions it requires some piecing together against the grain of the narrative.³⁰ We know that of the two sisters only Louise has ‘the lines of duty from nose to mouth’ (204). She has spent the last eleven years nursing their mother. ‘With every mouthful of biscuit and swallow of tea, she celebrated our mother’s death and her own release’, Puss observes, without saying whether Louise resents her for having fled to Paris (206). We know that Louise has inherited the family wealth while Puss gets a meagre stipend. We also learn that Louise was married, at eighteen, to a man who shortly went off to die in Malaya. At thirty-eight, she has been a widow her entire adult life.

³⁰ The story has been called ‘intellectually demanding’ (Skelton Grant) and ‘elliptical’ (Keefer 75) for this quality.

Why has Louise come to Paris? Puss says, ‘She was making a serious effort to know me’.

The sisters are not close. More frugal than fun, Louise has brought a heavy bicycle from

Melbourne:

She had brought it with her from Australia, thinking that Paris would be an easy, dreamy city, full of trees and full of time. The promises that led her, that have been made to us all at least once in our lives, had sworn faithfully that there would be angelic children sailing boats in the fountains, and calm summer streets. But the parks were full of brats and quarreling mothers, and the bicycle was a nuisance everywhere. Still, she rode it; she would have thought it wicked to spend money on bus fares when there was a perfectly good bike to use instead. (203)

Louise will not so much as buy a sandwich for her sister without charging her the exact amount, but as the sisters see it this is fairness, not spitefulness. ‘Gold and cold’ is how one Frenchwoman sums up Louise in a Right Bank drawing room, comparing her to a coin (209). Money is central to the story and its layered relationships. In writing about Louise, who makes a point of keeping two columns of figures, ‘Necessary’ and ‘Unnecessary’, Gallant gives a revealing explanation of her own authorial attentiveness to money:

She [Louise] guarded her books as jealously as a diary. What can be more intimate than a record of money and the way one spends it? Think of what Pepys has revealed. Nearly everything we know about Leonardo is summed up in his accounts. (213)

On its face, this is a story about a romantic entanglement – the affair between Louise and Patrick – but what emerges most strongly is the sisters’ estrangement. They confide nothing of their feelings, and as the story unfolds, Louise develops more intense relationships with first Patrick and then Sylvie.

The story opens on the winter afternoon that Louise meets the latter, an actress, who stops her on the stairs to ask for money (212). Louise sees Sylvie as ‘innocent and romantic’,

although her indiscretions ‘spread like the track of a snail’ across Paris (204, 233). An unlikely, and to Puss inexplicable, friendship forms:

Think of draggled laces, sagging hems, ribbons undone; that was what Sylvie was like. Hair in the eyes, sluttish little Paris face—she was a curious friend for immaculate Louise. (205)

Then there is Patrick, waiting for a visa to America and only pretending to be poor:

He was dressed like many of the students in the streets around our hotel, but her practical eye measured the cost and cut of the clothes, and saw he was false-poor, pretending. There was something rootless and unclaimed in the way he dressed, the way he sprawled, and in his eagerness to explain himself; but for all that, he was French. (210)

Louise’s affair with Patrick lasts a few days, until he comes down with the flu, at which point she becomes his nurse and errand girl. Puss ostensibly finds Patrick dull, a droning voice through the wall, but it later becomes apparent that she has been and is still interested in him, and that they may have been intimate in the past. She never says as much, but there are clues: the time she goes straight to his room on coming home; the time she opens and reads a letter he writes to Sylvie (for it transpires he is involved with the actress as well).

When Patrick is refused his U.S. visa, Louise bravely invites him to Melbourne, but he disdains her offer. Her response is bizarre: turning to Sylvie instead of Puss, she showers her with gifts, starting with an expensive necklace. She fudges the spending in her accounts, deflating the cost of the gifts and inflating her other expenses to make up the difference. When Patrick leaves, Louise is distraught, but she is really grieving for her lost husband. She finally goes home to Melbourne. There is never a reckoning between the sisters. Puss stays on and meets Sylvie once more in the summer. When Sylvie asks her if she ever heard from Patrick, Puss lies and says she did. Sylvie then boasts of having joined a sect and renounced materialism. The speech costs her the necklace from Louise,

for she can hardly object when Puss takes it from her. Puss, meanwhile, thinks of how much her sister spent and concludes of Sylvie, ‘After everything that was given her, she might have been more grateful. She might have bitten back the last word’ (237).

3.2. Possibilities of Escape and Transformation for Gallant’s Expatriates

It must first be noted that these stories foreground the opportunities that expatriate life offers for escape, transformation and reinvention. In ‘The Cost of Living’, Paris represents an escape from duty for Puss (and, belatedly, for Louise). It is the anonymity on offer in the hotel, with its distance from their social world in Melbourne, that brings the possibility of affairs for the sisters. In ‘Travellers’, Wishart is evidently a master escape artist, and he maintains a deliberately and carefully refashioned self; indeed, expatriate life is what makes this refashioning possible. His expatriate self exists as a work of authorship in a world where no one knows any better, or so he thinks. Wishart’s reinvention is obviously dramatic, but it presents *in extremis* something that goes hand in hand with expatriation. In the context of reflecting on her own experience of relocating to Italy, Hazzard once described the creative process of self-invention that attended the move: ‘One was creating one’s character and one’s personality in an irrevocable way and that was very interesting, apart from anything else. And I began to look at life in that light’ (Olubas 8-9).

In identifying the opportunity for reinvention in expatriate life, Gallant’s stories can be seen as pointing to many later expatriate characters who do the same. To give one suggestive example, Andrea Lee’s story ‘Brothers and Sisters Around The World’, published in February 2000, tells of a former model named only as ‘Madame’ who is

holidaying with her French husband on an island off Madagascar. Madame is African-American, and her husband loves her for an exoticism she does not actually possess:

He loves me for a number of wrong reasons connected with his dreams of hot islands. It makes no difference to him that I grew up in Massachusetts, wearing L. L. Bean boots more often than sandals; after eight years of marriage, he doesn't seem to see that what gives strength to the spine of an American black woman, however exotic she appears, is a steely Protestant core. (Lee, *Interesting Women* 74)

When a duo of Malagasy women start flirting with her husband, Madame slaps one of them. The action is completely out of character, as well as antithetical to the non-violence espoused in the book she reads her young son, *Brothers And Sisters Around The World*. The slap is a performance, but in this case the performance works: she earns the respect of the island women and thrills her husband. Rather than seeking to dispel her husband's wrong ideas of her, she remains convinced that her marriage succeeds because she and her husband are strangers to each other.

The comparison between this story and both of the Gallant stories serves to show that where Madame comes out on top, Gallant puts failure up front. Her characters frequently fail to be other than they are. They may attempt the trickery of reinvention, but the fox's magic is broken; the sleight of hand does not work. Where many a picaresque rogue moved up in the world by relying on his or her wits, Gallant's characters have trouble pulling this off. Thus in 'The Cost of Living', the girl doesn't get the guy; she doesn't even manage to talk honestly with her sister. Seen in this light, the cost of living to which the title alludes is the cumulative effect of the disappointments of life, the gap between one's hopes and what one brings about. Louise's heavy bicycle, brought from home, is an early sign of mistaken expectations, as well as a marker of an ineradicable Australianness. Having meant to bring about a change and get to know her sister, she fails dramatically. Likewise, in 'Travellers Must Be Content', Wishart knows he has failed: he sees his

failure reflected in his friend's sunglasses. His masquerade is never wholly successful, and even when it seems to work it comes at a cost: he is exhausted. 'The past is never dead', as Faulkner put it in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951); 'It's not even past' (Faulkner 85). So it is with Wishart, who cannot efface his former self.

At the same time, the stories serve to problematise notions of home and belonging. Home is a shadow-place somewhere else; it exists as a sort of haunting. It is not, however, an object of nostalgia. Wishart's relationship to the England of his birth echoes Eagleton's description of D. H. Lawrence as 'an exile from his own culture' who pursued 'rootless, frustrated wanderings' (192). If anything, Wishart's beginnings were more deprived. In his personal calculus of survival and success, belonging is a luxury he cannot afford. In Puss's understanding, belonging is hard to come by, too. Unlike Christina Stead, with her cosmopolitan credo (and, perhaps, a touch of bravado) that held belonging to be a matter of conviction, Gallant proceeds from the knowledge that she does not belong. Moreover, her stories convey the less obvious corollary that very few people do. Of the two Australian sisters, she is Puss, not Louise: Louise thinks she can readily pass into and understand French life, while Puss knows this isn't true (217). In these visions of expatriate life, belonging is perpetually elusive, a chimerical idea.

3.3. The Other Side of the Coin: Notions of Costliness and Economy

Another striking feature of these stories is their attentiveness to money as a 'burning fact' of life, and to the idea of costliness in particular. Everything comes at a cost: Wishart pays with his exhaustion, and cannot afford to dream. Working illegally in a city with too few jobs, Puss earns far less in Paris than she would in Melbourne. Then there are the costs

that are allowed to fall on others. Puss has not disavowed her family as Wishart did, but she did leave Louise to see to the care of their parents. The attention to money and costliness serves a number of purposes: firstly, it speaks to setting and character; secondly, it points the way to transformation and the costs of a person's choices; and thirdly, it uses economy of expression as an ambiguous good in evoking the costs of life abroad.

3.3.1 Economy as Setting and Character

In these stories, every place, every clique, even every relationship, has an economy all its own. Money creates a setting, a sense of time and place. This is partly why Gallant's stories offer, in Francine Prose's words, 'a milieu precisely situated in time and on the map of Europe and Quebec' ('Mavis Gallant's Magic Tricks'). In her youth, Gallant cultivated an idealistic socialism (Skelton Grant 6), so it might be thought that this economic interest amounts to a Marxist thesis – particularly because they evoke states of estrangement and alienation, about which Marxism had much to say (Marx 71-77). But the stories themselves do not sustain such a reading; instead, the attention to money and its workings functions as an aspect of Gallant's distinctive realism. For Gallant, realism meant making use of 'the enigmatic nature of the concrete' (Trussler 180).

Money reveals character, too. It is an antidote to glamour, fakery and pretence, tying characters (whatever they tell themselves and others) to the exigencies of life. When Louise is introduced 'converting the price of oranges, face powder, and Marie-biscuits from French francs to Australian shillings and pence' (205-6), it is like someone in a Chekhov story remarking that the catering for a funeral cost two and a half roubles a head,

including for the peasants who know nothing about sauces (Chekhov, 'In The Ravine').³¹ We might not know the conversion of two and a half roubles, but we know the character Anisim, a counterfeiter, by his comment, which shows him unable to believe a grieving family's largesse.

Lahiri writes that money is the fifth character in 'The Cost of Living' (xii), but really it is the key to all of the characters. Louise is a keeper of accounts, Sylvie a sponger. Puss, earning 'nothing', is on the outer, and Patrick is fake-poor, a pretender on all fronts. In 'Travellers', calculating Wishart knows his value, and knows that 'women who will fret over wasting the last bit of soap, or a torn postage stamp, or an unused return ticket, will pay without a murmur for the company of a man' (158). As others have noted, Gallant's depiction of politics works to similar effect in evoking character (Keefer ix, 11; Condé 168). In a much-quoted comment, Gallant once described her 1973 collection *The Pegnitz Junction* as 'a book about where Fascism came from... not the historical causes of Fascism—just its small possibilities in people' (Hancock 41). In Gallant, politics *is* character, and so is economy.

In 'The Cost of Living' especially, the sense of economy runs deep in more ways than one. Both sisters observe an economy of concision, even of withholding. Puss learns more about Louise from her accounts than from Louise directly, and she could not be more parsimonious about her own feelings. The exception that proves the rule is when she says in passing, after mentioning the loss of Louise's husband Collie (and without offering further elaboration): 'I was thirteen and they were the love of my life' (228). She means both Collie and Louise, but she does not even name her sister, who is merely included in

³¹ Gallant once said that she was particularly influenced by Chekhov (Skelton Grant 6).

her use of ‘they’. The effect is to establish a thoroughgoing rationing of feeling that is distinctive to Gallant’s depictions of post-war lives abroad.

3.3.2 Money as a Marker of Transformation and the Costs that Choices Carry

Money also points the way to transformation in these stories. It shows up as a companion to success, a strangely cheerless affirmation. It marks the successful reinvention, so that for Wishart being supported – being bought – is tantamount to being believed. It marks the state of estrangement too: Puss knows her sister will go on keeping her accounts, lavishing gifts on the likes of Sylvie and leaving her, Puss, out in the cold.

Sometimes, money itself is the transformation. This is the case in another of Gallant’s early stories, ‘When We Were Nearly Young’ (1960), in which a young woman (nationality unspecified) hangs out with her friends and waits for money in Madrid.³² The three friends (a law student, a bank clerk, and a young widow) are ‘New Spaniards – part of the first generation grown to maturity under Franco’ (*Collected Stories* 185), but it is money, not politics, that looms large. The quartet ‘lived on the thought of money’ (184), eating rationed bread or at a restaurant they call ‘the ten-peseta place’ (186). When the narrator receives the money she has been waiting for, it disqualifies her from the group: ‘They understood that my new fortune cast me out’ (191). Her friends know what Gallant knows: without exigency, there isn’t a story.

³² The story is the closest Gallant came to describing her experience eking out a living as a writer in impoverished Madrid, where she lived before settling in Paris. In this period, Gallant believed her stories were not selling and only learned the truth when she spotted one in *The New Yorker*. She had been hoodwinked by her agent, who had taken the money (Kalotay 198; Skelton Grant 8-9).

But in ‘Travellers Must Be Content’ and ‘The Cost of Living’, the emphasis is very much on the costs of life abroad: inauthenticity and exhaustion for Wishart; and estrangement for Puss. By emphasising these costs, and in a sense making them her subject, Gallant presents an unvarnished view of lives lived abroad. Here a useful contrast is Hazzard’s two collections of stories, *Cliffs of Fall* (1963), a mix of stories about international Anglophone life and particularly the institutions of marriage and family, and *People in Glass Houses* (1967), a satirical portrait of the United Nations. Few would call Hazzard a booster for the international life – her stories show disappointment and are often unresolved – but in comparison with Gallant’s stories her writing shows a greater optimism about cosmopolitanism, international work and the possibilities of love. Brigitta Olubas attributes this optimism to Hazzard’s humanist ideals, a ‘sense of the capacity of the heroic individual for revelation and for meaningful, material action in the world’ (241). Gallant’s stories are lonelier, to use von Baeyer’s word; they are freighted with a sense of cost.

3.3.3 Economy of Expression as an Ambiguous Good

For Gallant, economy is also a matter of form and style, and this is an attribute that many have praised in her work. Her stories move ‘as quickly and clearly as a glance’ (Ondaatje viii). ‘Line by line, word by word, no one writes more compactly, more densely, with more compression,’ wrote Francine Prose (‘Mavis Gallant’s Magic Tricks’). Gallant wrote of prizing economy in journalism and fiction:

Journalism recounts as exactly and economically as possible the weather in the street; fiction takes no notice of that particular weather but brings to life a distillation of all weathers, a climate of the mind. Which is not to say it need not be exact and economical: it is precision of a different order. (*Collected Stories* ix)

As Carson notes, economy is often assumed to be an unambiguous good (Carson 3). Carson seeks to complicate this notion in comparing Celan with Simonides. For Simonides, a poet who devised epitaphs to be inscribed (expensively) on the limited surface of a tombstone, compression was essential to his profitable commissions. For Celan, by contrast, economy of expression had other origins. As a German-speaking Jewish Romanian who had narrowly avoided the death camps of the Holocaust, he chose to write his poems in German, '[making] himself at home in his mother tongue only by a process of severe and parsimonious redaction' (Carson 31). Writing poetry in German meant constant negotiation, and his poems read as records of difficulty. The German language, his mother tongue, offered him few easy options. 'As for me I am on the outside', he once said with characteristic brevity (Carson 28).

Gallant's stories likewise invite closer attention to the specific ways in which words are used and withheld, and what meanings are conveyed by such rationing. They show that economy can hurt (as it does in 'The Cost of Living', where parsimony is cruelty and estrangement) or reveal trauma (as with the many characters in Gallant's stories who have survived unspeakable things). They show economy of expression to be an ambiguous good, so that, seen in this light, even their brevity suggests possible elisions and silences, marking out states of loss and estrangement. This is part of their deep ambivalence about post-war lives abroad, in which rationing of feeling comes with the terrain.

3.4. Conclusion

It becomes apparent that Gallant's various uses of economy are central to her depiction of expatriate states, evoking the opportunities and costs of mobile lives. In the stories

considered here, we find an authorial vision that does not assume or claim a sense of belonging, or even the knowability of the people of a place: no expatriation is ever wholly successful. If picaresque narratives spring to life in times of newfound social mobility, Gallant's fictions came into being in the long shadow of World War II, an event that gave mobility a new ambivalence. Movement is a ubiquitous state, but not to be seen as an unqualified good. At one level, the stories trade on a sense of possibility: Wishart sees his brilliant, refashioned self reflected back at him; the estranged sisters see their chance to get to know each other. Yet these characters are made to feel the costs of their choices. This is the other side of the coin, the concomitant of all that shimmering promise. As Gallant herself once said, 'I instinctively believe that everything has to be paid for, to some extent' (Hancock 67). In these stories, the costs of decisions are weighed out in estrangement, loneliness and exhaustion, and even economy of expression becomes an ambiguous good, potentially concealing (or revealing) trauma or hurt.

More broadly, Gallant's stories, beginning with her earliest short fictions and in successive collections, point the way to a continuing expansion of the *topos* of the short story. Of the many authors it is possible to discuss in this vein, I have mentioned Andrea Lee, whose stories evoke a glamorous European expatriate existence, and Jhumpa Lahiri, whose work as a second-generation American writer frequently delves into the lives of South Asian immigrant families and their educated, continent-hopping sons and daughters. Her stories also include a wider cast of Americans, Britons and non-immigrant South Asian characters such as Indian workers. Among contemporary Australian short story collections, Nam Le's *The Boat* (2008) aims for a breadth of range, splicing together different settings within a single collection. Living in the United States and writing of multiple elsewheres, Le's imaginative licence recalls Christina Stead's.

In the next chapter, I consider more fully the possibilities and dilemmas of contemporary cosmopolitan and expatriate fictions. In a time of increasing mobility and overlapping identities, there are many possible variations. Yet if this kind of mobility begins to sound effortless, Gallant's stories remind us that no expatriation is ever wholly successful, and nothing comes without a cost.

4. The Possibilities of Expatriate Fiction Now

4.1. From Twentieth-Century Cosmopolitanisms to New Imperatives

Thus far this exegesis has asked what are the possibilities of expatriate fiction as represented in Stead's *Letty Fox: Her Luck* and Gallant's 'Travellers Must Be Content' and 'The Cost Of Living'? The previous two chapters find distinctive answers in new readings of these mid-twentieth century works.

The commonalities are significant and telling: these expatriate fictions share a concern with life 'abroad' in undomestic settings and a sometimes savage or bleak disregard for romantic notions and conventional mores.³³ They adopt a low realism, taking the struggle to get by as a central concern, and showing the sweep of history through what Judith Skelton Grant calls 'unheroic lives' (12, 41). Both Stead and Gallant refused the more usual *topos* of their national literatures. Both problematised notions of the nation, home and belonging, Stead through her decidedly un-Australian fictions such as the picaresque *Letty Fox* and Gallant with her ambivalent evocations of expatriates and drifters. What emerges most strongly from the comparison, however, is the distinctiveness of their renderings of mobile lives, in a literary example of the 'situatedness' of cosmopolitanism (Robbins 250) or 'discrepant cosmopolitanisms' (Clifford 108). As Chapter 1 shows, Stead's and Gallant's conceptions of expatriatism and cosmopolitanism were personally and politically inflected: personally inflected in that the conditions they experienced at 'home' as women shaped the promise each saw in expatriation, and politically inflected

³³ This is true of Gallant, notwithstanding that one critic once described *The Pegnitz Junction*, famously an attempt to grapple with the origins of fascism, as a love story (Keefer 371; as to Gallant's lack of romanticism generally, see also Murray 107, 138).

by, for Stead, a committed socialism, and for Gallant, a chastened post-war consciousness.

In particular, and even though Gallant's early stories postdate Stead's novel by little more than a decade, the comparison shows the extent to which the authors responded to different moments. Gallant, who came of age as a writer later than Stead, was profoundly confronted by the phenomenon of fascism and the traumas of World War II. The war marked a stark divide in how writers viewed rootlessness. The dark fold in the twentieth century, it made it harder to see mobility as an unambiguous good, unshaded by darkness, trauma or grief. In making the notion of costliness a literary motif, Gallant's stories reflect a defining ambivalence about uprooted lives and human relationships in general. The contrast affirms a broader point about ideas of expatriatism and cosmopolitanism: that, although they are often presented as timeless, particularly in the case of cosmopolitanism, with a lineage going back to Diogenes of Sinope and continuing through Kant and others (Brennan 25), they are essentially contested and non-static, serving shifting purposes and meanings and engendering conflict (Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Perspective' 83; Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* 60).

This point refocuses attention on the present moment, the early decades of the twenty-first century, in which we encounter a new – and newly contested – set of understandings and debates about mobility, identity, citizenship and belonging. A new historical moment demands its own answers; it asks writers and critics to consider afresh the possibilities for writing about mobile lives. This imperative gives rise to the concern of this chapter, which turns to the possibilities of writing expatriate fiction now. What are the possibilities for a contemporary fiction that takes undomestic lives, and especially life 'abroad', as

one of its subjects, that takes the territory of somewhere else as its *topos* or terrain; and that is at the same time attuned to emergent patterns of globalisation with all its varied potential for interconnection and asymmetries?

4.2. The Turn in Readings of Cosmopolitanism and Expatriatism

Accounts of contemporary globalisation portray a complex and changing order characterised by rapid technological change, capitalistic flows of capital and goods, human migration, and mass media; this is a world of ‘global cultural flows’ (Appadurai 33).³⁴ As Shameem Black writes, ‘The pressures of late capitalism, the proliferation of mass media, and the forces of migration have created new conditions of visibility that make distant parts of the world suddenly seem much more entwined’ (6). Far from creating a seamless whole, however, these global cultural flows yield, in Inda and Rosaldo’s apt description, ‘a space of structured circulations, of mobility and immobility . . . of dense interconnections and black holes’ (35). In literary theory, analyses of migrant fiction, transcultural fiction and literatures of hybridity have illuminated a range of border-crossing experiences, from displacement to liminality (Dagnino). The extent to which diverse communities are seemingly shaped by their responses to global shifts led Zygmunt Bauman to conclude that ‘we are all being “globalized” ’ (1). This echoes the similar-sounding claim that ‘[w]e are all cosmopolitans’ (Rabinow 258). Yet the ongoing inequalities that are sustained and generated by these same global flows necessitate a critical stance towards any rhetorical

³⁴ In a neat formulation, Birns contrasts the late modernity known to Stead (‘socialist in economics, static in temporality and still patriarchal in gender politics’) with the neoliberalism of today (‘libertarian in economics, dynamic in temporality and . . . a wider range of gender roles and expressions’) (Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature* 39).

‘we’, and by the same token, an equally critical stance toward the concepts of cosmopolitanism and expatriatism.³⁵

To take cosmopolitanism first, critiques of a celebratory, uncritical version of the concept – and its literary manifestations – have mounted in recent decades (Shaw 7-9). Writing from an American perspective and in response to the failure of internationalism that he perceived in the Gulf War, Robbins noted the potential for a culturally arrogant stance:

Cosmopolitanism would seem to mimic capital in seizing for itself the privilege (to paraphrase Wall Street) of ‘knowing no boundaries.’ Which is also the gendered privilege of knowing no bodies: or being, in Donna Haraway’s words, ‘a conquering gaze from nowhere,’ a gaze that claims ‘the power to see and not be seen.’ (Robbins 171, quoting Haraway 188)

At the close of the twentieth century, Brennan critiqued a celebratory, self-flattering cosmopolitanism as obscuring an ongoing centering of Western interests, culture and values, and trading in false equivalences by collapsing the positions of Western intellectuals and participants in ongoing anticolonial movements (7-9, 18). Rob Wilson called for an ‘end of millennium . . . cosmopolitanism disgusted with legacies of imperialism and delusions of free-floating irony’ (359). In responding to fictional forms of expression in particular, influential postcolonial, feminist and ethnic-minority responses to ‘the gaze from nowhere’ have exposed the ways in which the narrative representation of alterity can constitute acts of ‘discursive domination’ (Mohanty 122; see also Black 23).³⁶

³⁵ Despite the apparent sanguinity of his statement, Rabinow argued for a critical cosmopolitanism, ‘an ethos of macro-interdependencies and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates’, in an early expression of a more nuanced approach (258).

³⁶ Such critiques follow Edward Said’s landmark study *Orientalism* (1978), which revealed the imperialist assumptions inherent in western representations of the ‘Orient’. Said later emphasised that ‘the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism’ (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii).

Against this backdrop of ‘disgust’, however, there has also been a turn toward refashioned and repurposed explorations of the cosmopolitan ideal (Brennan 309; Clifford 108; Robbins 173-177; Appiah xiii; Shaw 7). Loath to abandon the commitment to openness that is the promise (if not always the practice) of cosmopolitanism, theorists have grappled with how to arrive at a version that, as Brennan puts it, ‘respects autonomy and contestatory values’ (309). Clifford proposed a comparative cosmopolitanism based on a recognition that specific cosmopolitan viewpoints are hardly the sole preserve of white travellers (108), while Robbins argued against Hannerz’s exclusionary approach (177). As for the possible merits of a contemporary, cosmopolitan-minded fiction, Black and Shaw have both recently examined this issue by reference to novels published in the new millennium. Black’s study deftly captures the paradox facing authors in a globalising world: on the one hand, the representation of alterity may constitute an invasive imaginative act, but on the other, ‘not writing about others ultimately exacts its own ethical price’ (251). Drawing attention once more to the notion of costliness, this argument reminds us that certain fictions may cost others dearly.

One possible response might be to write of a narrowly-circumscribed social world to which an author can lay claim by virtue of his or her upbringing, but even if such depictions were capable of engaging with how we actually live, what is considered one’s world is often the subject of debate. In the case of migrant writers, this is seen in critical responses that trade in pigeonholing and mistake the nature of literary works (Black 29-31). Rather than rehearsing arguments for freedom of literary expression, however, Black argues for a new ethics of representation. Analysing an emergent body of what she calls ‘border-crossing fiction’, including novels by J.M. Coetzee, Amitav Ghosh, and Anita Desai, she defends the possibility of ‘noninvasive imaginative acts’ that ‘question, rather

than inevitably reinscribe, the inequalities and injustices of a globalizing world' (65). Among other recent studies, Kristian Shaw has examined recent cosmopolitan fictions by David Mitchell, Zadie Smith, Teju Cole and others, in which he finds an intent to 'detail the strategies of ordinary citizens to bridge divides with cultural others' (Shaw 23; see also McCulloch and Schoene). This cosmopolitanism 'is not simply a condition of rootlessness or hybridity . . . but rather a process of creative engagement between peoples and cultures in developing an openness to forms of alterity and the negotiation of a more interdependent world' (Shaw 7).

What of expatriate fiction in particular? In surveying nearly thirty works of expatriation fiction published in the U.S. this century, Caren Irr argues there has been a 'turn' in such narratives (177) which reveals a 'shifting syntax' (181). This is not immediately obvious: Irr notes that many of the novels share a self-conscious or satirical awareness of the genre's antecedents and their own derivative nature (181).³⁷ They are also typically incurious on matters of international politics and state power, in keeping with the complaint Paul Theroux once made about expatriates (184).³⁸ However, Irr finds exceptions in the works of authors such as Aleksandar Hemon, in which there is 'an emerging recognition of the formative effects of global inequities on travel and the mobile subject' (194).

A similar recognition appears in Cole's *Open City* (2011), which, as Shaw argues, displays a critical cosmopolitanism in the attention it pays to the non-elite mobilities of African migrants and its questioning of cultural empathy (Shaw 2). In an indication of the extent

³⁷ The authors discussed include Gary Shteyngart, Arthur Phillips, Tom Rachman, Rosa Shand, Richard Russo, Cynthia Ozick, Chang-Rae Lee, and Peter Cameron.

³⁸ Writing in the wake of his expulsion from Malawi for political activity, Theroux condemned what he saw as the self-interested quietude of other expatriates ('Tarzan Is An Expatriate').

to which putative categories overlap in practice, such writers can be and are discussed under the rubric of migrant fiction, yet they have also turned their attention to the ‘expatriate-cum-nomad sensibility’ (Irr 191). A recent novel by the Korean-American writer Janice Lee, *The Expatriates*, depicts the lives of American women in Hong Kong.³⁹ Some of the characters have Korean backgrounds, and this gives the portrayal of American expatriate life a further dimension. It is centrally a story about those who have, in another act of expatriation, ‘crossed over into that other country of motherhood’ (Lee, *The Expatriates* §11.40), and it offers a version of expatriate life in which the main characters seem to float free of the Hong Kong economy. Their focus on motherhood is heightened because they do not work.⁴⁰

Why, then, should ideas of expatriatism still hold resonance or currency? There are arguments that it should be seen as altogether irrelevant. One argument is that it remains a coded, racist way of talking about migrants who happen to be white (Koutonin, ‘Why Are White People Expats...’). Certainly, it is hard to argue that the idea of expatriatism has a future if it means nothing more than this. The other argument for the irrelevance of the expatriate is that the category is outdated in the time of the ‘global village’ (Pesman 222), in which citizenship as such assumes a diminished importance. This notion, which is often assumed rather than argued, is premised on the idea that the right passports, visas and work permissions are easy to come by. Yet national borders have not fallen away, and nor has nationalism. Instead, notions about the end of national identity have turned

³⁹ Published last year in the United States, Lee’s book has not dissuaded me from using my chosen title for the story cycle in this doctoral project, although this may be revised in the event of publication.

⁴⁰ Margaret is a mother and a one-time landscape architect who has followed her husband to Hong Kong. Jobless, childless Hilary toys with the idea of adoption and spends long hours in chatrooms. Ivy League graduate Mercy is younger and more vulnerable to economic winds: she finds only sporadic work and, when she accidentally falls pregnant, is relieved to give up looking for a career.

out to be much like the argument for the end of history, in that the declaration of the end came just before the deceased showed itself to be alive and kicking.

If proof were needed that a ‘cosmopolitan society means a cosmopolitan society and its enemies’ (Beck, ‘The Cosmopolitan Perspective’ 83; see also Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* 60), there has been a dramatic resurgence in nationalist critiques of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan elites. Appointed as the British prime minister in the wake of the Brexit poll upset, Theresa May said, ‘If you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere’ (May, ‘Conference Speech’).⁴¹ Writing in the Sydney tabloid newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, the former Australian Labor Party leader Mark Latham welcomed the rise of a (paradoxically transnational) nativist rebellion and aligned himself with the ‘non-elites living in flatland suburbs and regions’ (‘Global Elites . . .’). Latham quoted Niall Ferguson’s slighting description of the citizens of the nation-state: ‘You have one passport, if that. You hate the few words of French you learned at school. And you live within driving distance of your parents or your children’. He rejoined,

That’s a good enough description of my life, and millions of other Australians . . . This divide, the global elites versus local try-hards, goes a long way to explaining recent developments in politics, such as the Brexit vote, the Trump phenomenon in the US and the re-emergence of Hansonism in Australia.

A now-familiar account of the events to which Latham refers is that they marked a howl of animus (or, in Latham’s phrase, a ‘bold, glorious middle finger’) from those left behind by globalisation and the exportation of low-skilled jobs. The tenor of political discourse accompanying events on both sides of the Atlantic recalled Schmitt’s idea that societies need to cast outsiders as enemies in order to secure their internal cohesion and legitimacy

⁴¹ Robbins earlier advanced a similar critique, pointing out that ‘the cosmopolitan cannot be to the globe as the citizen is to the nation, and to suggest the contrary is to create dangerous illusions of global equality, responsibility, and voter-like control’ (184).

(27). This time around, however, cosmopolitan globe-trotters have been lumped in with foreigners and immigrants as enemies and disparaged as ‘elites’.⁴²

These developments, which have yet to work themselves out, will undoubtedly come to figure in untold new fictions. They will be weighed out and refracted in stories of specific lives, because this is what fiction does, or what it can do: it is ‘a unique medium through which to imagine cosmopolitan reconfigurations not yet conceivable or accessible in the contemporary moment’ (Shaw 4). New literary cosmopolitanisms might be based not on claims to a non-existent global citizenship, but on the kind of reflexive ethics Black proposes. Similarly, if there is something to be recovered from the idea of expatriation in literature, it is not, I suggest, simply a category of person or the act of leaving one’s country, but the individual’s negotiated relation to ideas of the nation, home and belonging. These negotiated states, which characterise the twentieth-century works of Stead and Gallant, figure just as prominently in the works of the writers discussed in this chapter. Beyond the ‘negative relation to nationality’ envisaged by Robbins (173), newer expatriate states encompass a variety of ambivalent relations. More than ever, such states are also increasingly conditioned by digital media, which allow the local and the transnational to constantly bleed into and disrupt the other.

4.3. ‘The Expatriates’ as a Short Story Cycle: A Provisional Ethos and Terrain for Writing of Mobile Lives

In the course of reflecting on how to write about mobile lives, I was also considering, first of all, a question of form. The central act of comparative reading in this thesis – the

⁴² This negative use of the word ‘cosmopolitan’ has a longer history in Russia and eastern Europe, where in the discourse of nationalists it is a coded way of saying ‘Jewish’ (see e.g. Ostrovsky chapter 1).

reading of Stead's picaresque novel *Letty Fox* against Gallant's short stories – offered a means of thinking through these modes of writing and weighing up their respective charms and limitations. The picaresque novel as represented by *Letty Fox* stands as one appealing possibility for expatriate writing: it encodes above all the spirit of movement, of going 'abroad' in the original, widest sense. But I also concluded that it brought certain problems. There is a risk that a picaresque novel written now will read like an exercise in pastiche, with little of the bite of this once-subversive genre. This was my impression of Kushner's *Flamethrowers*, which was set in the 1970s.⁴³ I ran up against this problem in my own early creative efforts. The other problem I encountered, which left me dissatisfied with my drafts, was the essential changelessness of the *pícaro*. The picaresque narrative has no interest in character transformation, and to a contemporary reader this can feel unsatisfying.

As Chapter 3 indicates, I turned instead to the short story cycle, which stands as another possibility for writing of life abroad. Gallant's stories appealed for their depictions of transformations, successful and otherwise. They speak to a kind of yearning that is foreign to a picaresque rogue. They also represent a different brand of realism: where *Letty Fox* is sprawling and ebullient, Gallant's stories are economical and enigmatic. They point to another way of depicting mobile lives. And, as the discussion of recent titles at the end of Chapter 3 illustrates, contemporary authors are continuing this strain in the short story, claiming the *topos* of 'abroad' for their collections. A cycle of short stories uniquely embodies movement by permitting the author (and the reader) to move on and on and on, shifting from place to place and time to time with each new story. In this sense as well, it 'suggests incessant motion' (Calvino, *Six Memos* 46, 35). A story cycle is allowed to be

⁴³ This might also be a function of characterisation: the protagonist Reno is so much the ingénue that she is really a cipher, an indistinct figure even to herself.

episodic and inconclusive, to offer a partial view and not a panorama. It can double back on ideas and look at them differently, or allow a set of themes to cascade through it.

In 'The Expatriates,' the cycle begins with Rowan, who is enmeshed in the schoolyard politics of an Australian mill town ('High Country'). It shifts next to a story about Arjun, an IT guy in Tokyo who obsesses over a college girlfriend ('How Is Your Great Life?'). Then there is June, who has fled a cult and needs to build a new life in a southern Japanese city ('Uncle Koji'). Sam is a disaffected lawyer who has set out to look for something else, only to be bailed up at immigration at Heathrow ('A Land Of Hope And Glory'). Shelley, an artist at a colony in Spain, comes to a crossroads with her boyfriend Dan ('The Black Madonna'). Paul is an English tutor who works for oil-rich Russians and has an unhealthy attraction to what he cannot have ('An Invitation'). Sydney café owner Margot endangers her monastic single life when she strikes up a flirtation with her long-estranged husband ('Joyride'). And, sometime in the near future in a colony on a Mars-like planet, an embattled freelancer, Sebastian, flirts with the idea of death ('Day Zero').

Of these characters, some are expatriates in the usual sense, but all are (or have been) abroad in the original, widest sense. These are undomestic stories, set away from the hearth, but they do not fetishize or glorify expatriate states. Instead, they seek to unsettle and redefine the idea of expatriation, doing so through a series of overlapping tactics. The first story grounds the cycle by starting close to home, in a mill town in southeastern New South Wales – but it is written, like all the stories in the cycle, with an eye to historical and economic winds, and the ways in which belonging is fiercely contested. The purpose here is resist the expatriate tendency to view 'home' as 'a privileged site of nostalgia . . . where things once seemed fairly simple and straightforward' (Hannerz 248).

In 'High Country', regional Australia is not timeless or isolated, but a specific instantiation of modernity, involving what Drusilla Modjeska calls 'the stuff of (modern) lives' (Modjeska, *Timepieces* 209). In Modjeska's argument, fictional depictions of an exotic Australia (in Tasmanian Gothic, for example) are cast as antithetical to depictions of contemporary Australian life. By contrast, 'High Country' proceeds on the idea that specific instantiations of Australian modernity are themselves exotic, at least when looked at through eyes that insist on their strangeness and peculiarity, and that refuse the dulling inertia of familiarity and taken-for-grantedness. It thus begins an attempt, which is carried on throughout the cycle, to complicate the equations of home equals straightforward and elsewhere equals exotic. It also links expatriatism to colonialism, an idea that also re-emerges later in the cycle: the Coffeys, whose pastoral property hides a mass grave of Aboriginal people killed by their forebears, are said to live 'like expatriates' in their own country.

Later stories play with the category of expatriate by turning to characters who either do not conform to our usual ideas of expatriates (an Estonian hostess and an Indian IT manager in Tokyo in 'How Is Your Great Life?'), and characters who conversely appear to paradigmatically represent the expatriate figure (American artists abroad in Spain in 'Black Madonna), but who do not, in a sign of the changing economic times, possess the freedom of independent means or a secure vocation. That is, they (and the world of contemporary artistic production) are shown in the light of early twenty-first century economic realities. Succeeding stories explore expatriate states that problematise the nation and notions of home and belonging. June's expatriate state comes of having left a cult and of feeling intensely foreign in her own country ('Uncle Koji'). Sam is conscious

of crossing not only national borders but also epochs; he feels the times do not suit the person he has been ('A Land of Hope and Glory'). In a return to the trope of the exotic, Paul is attracted by an exotic idea of Russia in a story that at first appears to offer the tantalising prospect of undressing or knowing the other – here, Russia's wealthy elite ('An Invitation'). It leads instead to Paul's own darker recesses, undermining his claim to be boringly suburban and uninteresting.

The penultimate story attempts to grapple, following Stead and Gallant, with the opportunities and costs of undomestic lives, particularly for women ('Joyride'). The *pícaro* of the story is Margot, who has led an episodic, undomestic life. Now in her sixties, she flirts with her estranged husband in text messages and emails and perceives a last chance to opt in to domesticity and coupledness. The final story brings a thematic return to colonialism and imperialism, this time in space ('Day Zero'). It portrays a settler culture that seeks legitimisation in professions of the beauty of the landscape, but is also irrevocably tied up in a coloniser's war against an unnamed foe. Echoing Brennan's contention that cosmopolitanism has long had expansionist dimensions (7-9), the story considers space exploration and settlement as a new theatre for evolutions of the ideal. Superficially, enthusiasm for space exploration recalls Diogenes' claim to be 'a citizen of the cosmos', and future cosmopolitanisms might conceivably encompass radically expanded notions of belonging as space exploration progresses. Yet we should question whether space enthusiasts are declaring an allegiance to the greater cosmos or getting ready to disavow a troubled Earth.⁴⁴ Some envision the colonisation of Mars as a (no

⁴⁴ Elon Musk, for example, has spoken with pessimism about the future of human life on Earth, predicting what he calls an 'extinction event' (Plumer and Resnick, 'Elon Musk Plans to Colonize Mars'). Given the humanist underpinnings of cosmopolitan thought (Skrbis, Kendall, and Woodward), we should be wary of cosmopolitanisms that reject the basic notion of society as a shared project. A similar argument can be made in respect of the expatriatism of wealthy survivalists who buy properties – and residency – in places like New Zealand in the hope of surviving a cataclysm (Osno, 'Doomsday Prep...').

doubt highly exclusive) opportunity to opt out of the mounting problems facing humanity on Earth, and tend to gloss over the immense barriers to inhabiting the planet (Boyle, 'Everything About Mars...'). I allude to these challenges in the story, which in presenting life on a Mars-like planet as fraught with difficulty, recalls *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot's vision of post-war desolation.

Throughout, the story cycle gives expression to a set of concerns that, in different constellations, make up its expatriate states. First, in common with earlier expatriate fictions, it features quests for escape, transformation and reinvention. Thus Rowan escapes pre-assigned class divisions, June escapes a cult, and Sebastian must reinvent himself as a credulous seeker of hippie cures. Unlike the self-conscious, satirical narratives analysed by Irr, the stories do not treat these quests as defunct or leading nowhere; however fraught they might be, they are paradoxically necessary. Writing the stories, I became increasingly interested in the opportunities for aspirational shape-shifting that come with a decision to move elsewhere, as with both June and Sebastian. The word *kitsune*, which appears in 'Uncle Koji', is Japanese for fox and suggests the shape-shifting spirits that in Japanese folk tradition variously appear as beautiful women or as foxes. In the story, it is the old man, Uncle Koji, who most recalls a shape-shifting spirit, and his mysterious comings and goings mark June's fitful progress in forging her new life. Sebastian, by contrast, must find a way to go on despite his recurrent cancer, so the question of reinvention takes on a new, overriding urgency.

Secondly, and following the attention to economic realities in Stead and Gallant, the story attempts to render the evolving economies of the twenty-first century's early decades, featuring an uneven globalisation and its embedded inequalities. As in Stead and Gallant,

economic matters are an omnipresent part of reality, a constitutive dimension of the material, profane world. Thus ‘The Expatriates’ portrays a world of booms and busts, of an eroding middle class and the gig economy, of dangerous places where freelancers dare to tread. Money can point to a future of opportunity (‘Kitsune’) or insecurity (‘The Black Madonna’). In particular, the stories foreground the shifting patterns of life experienced by Generation Y. On its surface, ‘A Land Of Hope And Glory’ shows the broad dehumanising power that is wielded by the state in liminal zones like airports, but it is also about Sam’s awakening to a changed economic landscape. His generation has known many privileges, including higher education and a path into professions like law, but it also faces precarious work as part of what can be described as the new ‘knowlecariat’ (Anonymous Guardian columnist, ‘Academia Is Now Incompatible with Family Life’). Having struck out from home and hearth, Sam is bewildered to realise that the comfortable middle-class life he has disdained might not be widely available in future. He is surprised to feel its loss – and surprised that he feels it *as* a loss. In this and other stories, such as ‘The Black Madonna’ and ‘An Invitation’, characters experience vertiginous processes of economic and social change. The stories thereby construct the present historical moment, with its moving targets of late modernity and global capitalism, as a perpetually new country.

Thirdly, the stories evoke shifting and varied forms of connection experienced by their characters. Expatriates they might be, but they cultivate a host of (sometimes unlikely) connections, reaching for what Robbins calls ‘a density of overlapping allegiances rather than the abstract emptiness of non-allegiance’ (173). They find shared society among their friends and associates, though this may be fluid or fleeting (‘How Is Your Great Life?’ and ‘Uncle Koji’). Similarly, they exist in a state of connectedness that redefines relations

to nation and culture, even and especially *in absentia*. The stories imagine ‘“glocal” spaces in which the dynamic tension and creative interplay of global and local systems complicate existing forms of belonging and questions of cultural identity’ (Shaw 7). Tellingly, in ‘An Invitation’, Paul’s home life in England drags him back from his attempted escape to Russia; it refuses to stay in the background. Other characters’ ‘glocal’ experiences are conditioned by technologies and digital media: the flurry of text messages and emails of the flirtation in ‘Joyride’ and the poor-quality phone calls that connect Sebastian to his father in Illinois in ‘Day Zero’.

Taken together, the stories seek to map a provisional terrain and ethos for a contemporary fiction that can grapple with emergent patterns of living in the present moment. They aim to recover and repurpose a more expansive expatriatism, in which expatriation figures not as a narrowly exclusive category of person, but as the individual’s negotiated relation to ideas of the nation, home and belonging. The relation may, as in the past, be a negative one, or it might alternatively encompass a range of ambivalent states. The stories attend to contemporary developments – to global cultural flows – in evoking the mobile lives of their characters. For all that, though, they are not meant to be read as a guidebook to the times. They have their origins in the desire for understanding; they are one exploratory means of making sense of ‘something that escapes us’ (Calvino, ‘The Written and the Unwritten Word’ 39).

Ultimately, the storyteller or writer of fiction stands apart from the historian, who according to Benjamin bears the task of explanation (Benjamin 369-370). He or she also stands apart from the journalist, who bears the task of description. As Gallant wrote, where the journalist describes the weather in the street, the writer of fiction aims to bring

to life ‘a distillation of all weathers, a climate of the mind’ (*Collected Stories* ix). This cycle of stories offers one such distillation. In evoking the conditions and quandaries of modern mobile lives, they explore what it is to be abroad in the exotic now.

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