

Fly

the beginning

I sit on the edge of the couch, perched and stiff. I am very nervous. When you walk in it's in a kind of a rush, you are flustered but laughing, your voice is husky. Your blonde hair falls from a cowlick across your face; you wear makeup and jewellery and carry a green handbag. You are very confident. You talk easily about your day as you stuff your clothes into your sister's washing machine. She and my best friend cook us dinner, they are lovers and their kitchen is on the second floor of their flat, cosy, like a tree-house. They cook us roast beef with potatoes and pumpkin. The pumpkin is buttery and sweet, like kumara, and you ask for seconds. We sit with our knees touching, and even though this is only the second time we've met, I have to stop myself from putting my hand on your thigh. We play Pictionary and I lean right over your drawings so our cheeks are close, almost touching, and I can feel your breath on my temple. You've had a bottle of wine to yourself but you insist on driving me home.

When you undress I see that your body is beautiful. Your skin is buttery and soft, and you smell like roses. In bed you are a little intense, a little too eager to please; everything is a little too fast and too rough. I want to tell you to slow down, but I don't.

I take you to ACMI to see *Dogs in Space*. It is my favourite movie and I hold your hand. Your hands are big for a girl's, they are bigger than mine, but I don't mind. You're wearing my lumber jacket: you wore it all the way down Swanston Street and it felt like a dream, you striding happily beside me, holding my hand in front of everyone. I was thrilled.

After the film you decide we will have dinner in Toorak, in an Indian restaurant near your flat. I don't like the food, but it is your favourite, so I eat it anyway. I find it hard to concentrate on what you say, you are too sophisticated and beautiful and I feel like a child. Afterward we lie together on your oversized couch. You pour me a glass of wine and tell me the Pinot will probably be my favourite. Your bedroom is crisp and clean and white, like a hospital; the bed sheets are thick cotton and smell like perfume, fresh and sweet. I feel safe in your big white bed. There are no dogs trying to get under the blankets and no children

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demanding attention. I can hear the Melbourne city-hum, and I fall asleep with my arms around your chest.

We only have eight weeks together, because you're going to London to live. I try not to fall for you but your beauty is powerful. When you smile you tilt your head and your eyes are shiny and kind. You tell me, *let's make this the best eight weeks ever*: You tell me, *I miss you already*. When you come home from work you strut into my lounge room in your high heels and take my face in your strong hands and kiss me. You always seem in a hurry, flustered and laughing. You'll take control of dinner so I can rest. You rearrange my kitchen and throwaway the things I don't need. When you tell me you love me, you pronounce 'you' as 'yeuw'. You say it's the Sydney in you.

I love yeuw.

On your last weekend in Australia you take me to Daylesford. We have dinner at a fancy restaurant and I am uncomfortable with my shaved head and tattoos. You order me a Pinot and choose our meals from the menu. You show me which fork to use and explain what the little piles of food are on our entree plate. You've booked a spa for us in a tree house, and we sit giggling in our fresh white robes waiting for the spa to fill. You say, *We won't ever forget this*. You say, *I adore yeuw*. I sit up against the jets but I can't feel the bubbles against my skin. Outside the winter sun is high and bright and shines through the timber blinds, painting the walls with golden stripes. I kiss you all over but the room is too hot and we have to keep opening the door to let in some air. I feel the winter cold on my skin, like dry ice, and sink lower into the water.

Later at our hotel we make love for hours on the crisp white bed. You are pretty and sexy in your lacy pants, but it takes me a long time to come. While you fall asleep I listen to the blinds tap against the window pane, like tiny bursts of Morse code. Your head is heavy on my chest and I try to imagine a future without you. You whisper, *Come to London*. You whisper, *Come and have Christmas with me*. I tell you *I will, of course I will*.

I love yeuw.

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the middle

Can you see me?

There I am, see me sitting at the computer answering your emails when I should be studying, see me work all day then wash endless dishes in four different bar kitchens, see me forget what day it is, see my son go to school in dirty clothes because I forgot to do the washing, see my small reserves of fat fall away as I forget to eat, see the endless brooms the mops the food scraps the whining customers, hear the *ORDAH! ORDAH!* as docketts pile up onto each other, see me wipe food scum off the plates with my bare hands see me sitting exhausted in the small space between shifts in my backyard trying to warm my skin under a cool spring sun, see me watch the Qantas jumbos sailing gently across the sky hear their serious low rumble as their wheels descend waiting to kiss the earth see my friends stop calling me because I never come out see me wait for your emails and cry when they don't come see me panic because I haven't heard from you in four days, see me cry into the sink because I already know see me walk down the tunnel and onto the plane without fear to get to you even though I know, I already know, I know it as the plane heaves itself up into a cold Melbourne sky, I know it i know it ...I know it. Maybe you no longer want me.

Can you see me?

the end

I'm in London, in your new room. Your clothes are everywhere, spilling out of suitcases and onto the floor. You've moved around so much, you don't bother to unpack anymore. Out of the window I can see a park. There are couples walking across the grass, men in trucks, school kids mucking about. Planes fly overhead one after the other, big jumbos with their wheels down, descending towards Heathrow. There is a constant, low-level city hum, a growl that never goes away. I am on the opposite side of my world; I am upside-down, alien. My country is so new, an infant; nowhere in Melbourne can you put your hand on a building and tell yourself it's one thousand years old.

I'm scared.

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I sit in the lounge room and drink pots of tea. It takes me half the day to leave the house. On Bethnal Green Rd the air is too cold for me, it hurts me to breathe. I walk up and down Oxford St, but I don't know where I'm going. Everyone is in a hurry; no matter where I stop I am in someone's way. I'm careful to avoid the tube station closest to your work. If you see me, it might make you angry. One pound sixty for a cappuccino, which comes in a giant mug and tastes like skim milk. People stand in doorways of buildings and hold up signs. A nasty man sells roasted chestnuts and yells at people who try to warm themselves by his fire. A woman's purse gilts snatched in front of me at the ATM, and she howls as though her child has been taken. A woman's voice on the tube tells me endlessly to mind the gap and I wonder how many people have actually fallen into it.

When you get home, before you smile, before you come and hug me and tell me about your day, I see a frown.

I take you to the ballet, to see *The Nutcracker*. I take you to the Ritz for High Tea. We make love in our seats under your coat on a train on the way to Dover. We go to a fair in Hyde Park and the operator of the Ferris wheel takes a liking to you and won't let us off. We go Ice-skating at Hampton Court, and take a ride on the London Eye at dusk. The lights below are very beautiful, like a postcard, but I don't know what to say to you. I have to think very hard before I speak, so that you don't shake your head and roll your eyes. Sometimes you snap at me when I ask simple questions, and it makes my chest hurt. At night I dream I am under water, lost beneath the black ice the cold stones the ancient bones of ancient men.

We catch a ferry to Paris. You sit by the window in your black fur hat and drink wine from a miniature glass. The French man behind the bar is rude to me and when I tell you about it you roll your eyes.

Our hotel is on the *Rues de Nemours*. It is small and warm and to get to it we have to squeeze into a tiny elevator and hold our bags above our heads. I open the windows and look out at the pretty street below. It is quintessentially French, there is a colorful greengrocer on the corner where a man in a striped blue apron sings out the front, and across the road there is a tiny supermarket where thin ladies with poodles on leashes walk

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in and out. I take photos and try to feel excited. When we make love your skin is soft and hot but I can't stop shivering, I can't get warm.

We catch a train to Amsterdam and eat *erwtensoep* on the *Leidestraat*. I am happy and excited because this is where my father was born, this is where my ancestors are from. When we get to our hotel you get annoyed with me for dropping my coat on the floor. We argue loudly and I hear myself call you a bitch. I ask you, *Where did you go?* I tell you, *I don't know you anymore*. You tell me *I am a child*, and calmly unpack your things. You have a long shower while I sit outside in the courtyard on a white metal chair. It is windy and damp and the cold makes my teeth chatter but I can see the silver night sky, I can feel the Dutch winter cold on my skin, I look up at the same stars my father saw as a young man and I think, this is special; this is where part of me began.

When I kiss you goodnight you don't kiss me back. You tell me, *I have nothing left to give*. I part the curtains a little and lie with my head close to the window, so that when I wake up in the morning the first thing I will see is the sky.

You have to fly back to London for work, so I travel by myself to Denmark. In Copenhagen my hostel room is high above the city on the 27th floor. I stand at the window and stare down at the harbour. Through the fog the roads are shiny and black, like liquorice, and I can see the blinking lights of cars and ships and bicycles. For the first time in my life I am completely alone, nobody knows who I am. Below me the water heaves and shifts, making the lights of buildings dance on its dark surface. I press my face against the clean glass. I am anonymous; I am nobody's mother, nobody's daughter, nobody's sister, niece, auntie. The room is clean and white but my bones are cold. Who am I? I haven't the faintest idea.

On my birthday you surprise me with a trip to Venice. We spend a weekend in a hotel in the Marco

Polo Square. Our room is at the top of four flights of stairs, big and clean and romantic. When we've paid for our room, and dragged in all of our luggage and locked the door behind us, you push me down on the bed and slowly kiss me. As a birthday present, we are still lovers.

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We spend the day wandering around the markets, drinking syrupy hot chocolates and eating ice-cream and nougat. There aren't too many tourists, because it's winter, but the water still smells. You say happy birthday to me over and over, almost manically. When I irritate you, which is often, you bite your lip. You wear a tight smile and hold my hand. I'm careful not to talk too much. *Happy birthday, you say. Happy birthday happy birthday happy birthday.*

On our last afternoon, before we hurry onto a boat and back to the airport, we make love in the cool white sheets. Your skin is soft and warm, your hair smells like strawberries. I can hear a child shout, *Venuto e gioco!* I tell you *you're beautiful*, and you roll your eyes. You tell me, *Stop gushing*. When you leave the bed to have a shower I lie very still. A fly lands on my hand and I watch it wash its head with thin little arms, over and over, licking and wiping like a cat but with more precision. It washes its wings one by one, stretching them back, and then it washes its back. I watch as it pokes out its tubular tongue, I can see its eyes, it looks like a little person, a tiny person washing himself, rhythmic, beautiful. It sits on my hand like a pet. When you re-enter the room it takes flight, it flies away, it buzzes wildly and loses its beauty. It sounds ugly, it is a fly again, but when it sat on my hand I felt like it knew me, like we were sharing a joke, nature's joke, a cosmic joke. It makes me smile.

On my last night in London we go to a girl bar in Soho. It's packed with women but we sit in the corner and fight. I say, *Tomorrow when you drop me off at Heathrow, you will breathe a sigh of relief*. You say, *So will you*. We catch a double decker home and sit up the top. I rest my face against the dirty glass and watch the endless city streets rush past. I tell you, *This city is too big*.

We take the tube to Heathrow but we don't talk. We have lunch in a dirty cafe where everyone is smoking. You seem restless, impatient for us to part. At customs you start to cry, you ask, *Do you regret coming?* I lie that I don't, *of course I don't*. When I go through customs my legs are shaking but I don't look back.

When I'm seated on the plane I see you have sent me a text. You tell me to have a safe trip, you call me 'precious'. It makes me sad, but I can hear the steady roar of the engines, I can see the winter sun coming down from a grey and white London sky, soon I will feel the warmth of a Melbourne summer on my skin and feel the strong clumsy arms of my son when he envelopes me in his strong clumsy way at the airport.

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As the huge plane lifts itself effortlessly into the sky, I wonder if you can call it falling, that sensation of abandoning yourself to the whims of someone else, someone you can't ever truly know the way you know yourself? Maybe it isn't falling after all. Maybe it's a kind of floating, or flying, high up in the sky with the sun on the back of your neck and your heart pumping, wild and strong.