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The Late Visit

ANTONIA PONT

THE EMAIL HAD SAID TEN PAST TEN. And then customs and baggage collection takes at least forty-five minutes. She chose a fine wool dress, a paler coat. More specifically the email had said:

Hallo!

Well I am coming to Australia finally. Will You be there? Are You free? My plane arrives in Melbourne at 22.10 on the 4. I have a hotel booked somewhere in the centre. How are You? I have a present for You. Tell me soon, I hope it can be convenient.

Kisses, and I look forward,
Marc.

The 'You's', naturally, were all capitalised, and the fourth was a Saturday. A late enough flight. She had replied that she was in town and could collect him. He should look for her at the international exit and wait close to there, in case traffic delayed her. There, where all the faces press and the families throw themselves into each other's arms as if the love between them was kicking like a foetus, warm and real. Perhaps it was warm and real? She'd never really considered that. Instead she'd assumed such rash shows of fondness arose from absence and distance only. Or the prevalence of reality TV.

In the car now, she played music through her phone, flicking the songs forward illegally, wondering about the screen's light reflecting up into her windows—going at a hundred on the dark freeway. There was no moon about, no beaming source of milky light. The city, however, did glower behind her, as cities do. Never properly black. Never quiet. It was so boring, though, the way people complained about the fact of sharing urban space. Drivers complained. Property developers complained. People who liked to use electronic devices complained.

Approaching the airport, there was slight congestion—taxis changing lanes, four-wheel-drives edging forwards, the piercing reds and oranges of tail-lights.

She worried at her long hair, tucking it behind her ears and then unhooking it again. She couldn't say with conviction that she was still beautiful, or if that had ever been the issue between them. In her bathroom mirror she had looked into the face of a woman past forty and applied a lipstick called 'Winter Fruit'.

He'd once remarked that he knew nothing of the things that surrounded her, apart from a scarf she'd often travelled with. Having never visited her city,

Fiction

he had come to view this woollen garment as standing in for everything about her. He could only imagine her kitchen, her wardrobe, her garage, her pets. That's to say, the only consistent themes had been this scarf and her body—a person arriving, lingering or leaving—or words, agile, irreverent words, coming through the phone line or scabbled together in emails. The rare letter.

She pressed the button to make the boom gate rise. The slot for the car-park ticket glowed green as she took the flimsy rectangle and proceeded to drive slowly up the ramp to the higher levels. She nosed her car in between an old Volvo and a Porsche People Transporter, and stepped out into the fumes of the car park. In the white opacity of the pedestrian tunnel her head was a blank sky. She walked and felt every step, focusing on the way gravity will carry a foot and place it, and how the ground moves up the leg and into a belly, into a sacrum, and the way this places a person in the centre of the world, at least for a time, at least as the result of a moment-by-moment labour of feeling.

She had expected to wait. Had pictured herself standing there, marooned, buying a bad coffee, fatigue climbing her like a vine and her eyes going dry while she tried not to rub her mascara into fist-sized smudges. But as she strode into the arrivals area, past the awful food outlets, almost aggressively, there he was—standing beside the exit area, a head above everyone around.

He saw her immediately, raised his arm. For certain things there is no preparation, and you can only think so much, and you can only forbid yourself so much thinking. She had presumed they might not touch at all, and that this would be workable. But, of course, social mannerisms are thick within us, and their two bodies moved appropriately, and their cheekbones knocked softly. He did not bundle her against him, the way he once might have. He had a trolley and bags, and he was older too. They both were.

She made to take his luggage, since helping is what a woman will do to fill in space, to suck the edge out of an atmosphere. He laughed in an exhausted way, and said, 'It's fine.' All he had with him was a featureless laptop bag (probably for a PC), and a long, softer duffle bag, stained but not ratty. She wanted to look properly at his clothes, to decipher something there, but they were already walking beside each other towards the car park, and she couldn't really see.

The air temperature had bite. They mentioned this, and prattled—since this they could do—about expectations of Europeans arriving in Australia, and how Melbourne was a city of seasons, and how autumn was here, and there was this crisp feeling about, the trees changing colour and a certain way with the people, and crowds on streets.

'Are you shattered?' she asked.

He paused, digesting the vernacular, and then, with another soft laugh, nodded.

His bags were slung into the back seat of her four-door, and she watched him wheel the trolley to the nearby station, legs extremely long in the loose pants. She'd paid for the parking ticket as they'd come out of the wide, slow lifts. A mere three dollars. She'd been estimating costs, as a kind of anxiety management, turning the symmetry of numbers over in her head and indulging the structural caress of figures behaving predictably.

Now they were sitting in the car, but she hadn't turned on the engine.

'Shall I drive you back to your hotel, then?' she asked, frightened. Her knuckles on the gear stick were white. When she turned the key, sound exploded from the radio, and she fumbled it quiet.

Quickly he said, 'I don't need to sleep yet. I don't want to. I might act kind of crazy, like a drugged tourist-person, but that's okay. Can we go somewhere? I want to see your town.'

She breathed out—the way smokers release smoke—broke into a charming smile and reversed almost arrogantly, since he would never have seen her drive before. Her phone was buried in her handbag, but there was no need to send anyone a text message. Since the day before his email arrived, she had been free of any obligation to inform. This was the new state of affairs. It was exhilarating, efficient and utterly miserable. Now she focused on getting the paper rectangle back into its green slot, and on not veering into any Audis or C-class Mercedes.

Her car no longer had the new smell, but it was clean, with no signs of takeaway food wrappers or paper coffee cups. A snob when it came to interiors, she hoped he noticed and approved of her as much as she did of herself.

What was he seeing? Those first delicious and estranged hours of a foreign arrival are precious. The way eyes roam and suck at every detail—the makes of cars, the unfamiliar fonts of billboards, the different light. Even at night a city will have its own light and will taste differently. She remembered her own eyes watering during an arrival in Beijing, tears running the pollution down her face, and a cartoon giraffe driving a ute on a road safety advertisement.

Smell and temperature. The unfamiliar press of air pressure. It's the way a place saturates us that stays. She watched the road, accelerating to one hundred and some.

Finally he said, 'You know I waited in Singapore for eight hours. You always implied it was pretty bad, but now I really understand ...'

She turned her head fast, 'That's nothing,' turned back, 'try seventeen ...'

She imagined him rolling his eyes, a quirky habit he had, his exaggerated listening.

'... yes, beware the cheap ticket. In the end, it's like you have to make yourself into a *butoh* performance. A creature pushing a trolley along the shining white acres of duty-free corridor. Or you sleep shamelessly in a corner, like an alcoholic, fantasising soft, familiar surfaces ...' Her face flushed suddenly hot, so she said quickly: 'You still dancing?'

'Dancing?' He rubbed at his scalp through the still-undisciplined mass of hair. 'Wow, that was a long time ago. I'm a manager now. Managers, do you know, don't *dance*. We are cheerful and manipulative, but we do not dance.'

'Are you really manipulative?' He didn't answer. She flicked the indicator to take the exit to her suburb, but then realised her mistake and drove straight past it.

'Is that where you live?' he asked, missing nothing despite exhaustion.

'I'm going to take you into the thick of things. I think you'll like it.'

She was going to take him somewhere ridiculous. For herself, because that was her style, but also for the anonymity. Somewhere ridiculous where no-one from her circle would go on a Saturday. Somewhere open late, with good food. She would pay. She didn't know what kind of budget he was on. She wanted to be hospitable. It was her first chance to do it in her town. But mostly she didn't want any chance encounters. Being put on the spot would scour her out, somehow. She would trip over her own ardent ambivalences and betray something about herself that even she didn't know. She prayed suddenly, with the hypocrisy of the disbeliever: *God, please let us not run into anybody.*

Normally she would have circled for a parking spot, also praying, but she didn't want the rhythm of their night to go pear-shaped. So, prepared to pay a small fortune, she approached another car park boom-gate. As they rolled their way up the fourth ramp, in the cramped space, he suddenly grabbed her leg and squealed 'Yippee.'

How old is a friendship that isn't surprised by random gropings? She knew what it meant, and why then, and also that the gesture of grabbing her was his capacity for glee romping out of him. It wasn't a manoeuvre. It was in no way sexual. Like a yell, like all the sunshine caught inside a body, it was his way, splattering out in a kind of lightshow of delight.

She remembered suddenly that first trip in his town. The air had bitten them then too, and her face in photographs could only be described as ruddy. She had had joy beaming from all her surfaces and he had been the vehicle for it.

The body that had been closest, when the unnameable happening happened to her. And she still didn't have a name for it. That had been the long struggle.

The car doors slammed, and she pressed central locking. Walking beside him she feigned normality, and he walked too, but interspersed his measured, adult gait with sudden jigs and fancy footwork. Gambolling, she would have called it. His fleecy head and gentle eyes. She could only grin at her shoes, turn her head away, as if brushing hair out of her face, but not really.

Out beyond the thick floors of concrete, the city's lights swam in her vision. She walked him along the river, embarrassed by the horrific font and newly added sightseeing-for-dummies signs blighting the visual landscape. He didn't seem to notice, gazed off into the middle distance, didn't even particularly turn his head at the obviously vivacious groups of younger women.

They walked in silence, and she wondered about which language. Probably English, but perhaps he would drift towards his mother tongue when the static of fatigue began to etch him through. Perhaps she would hear that voice on him—steady, limpid, and male—the one that came with linguistic ease. She was suddenly frightened again—of it hitting into her (what she knew might come) and was certain that she wasn't prepared, and knowing the fallout, how long it would take her to get that out of her system.

He played visitor, allowing himself to be led. Through the sparkling night they went, beside the water, then came to the restaurant she'd chosen in advance. The wait staff almost knew her there and so greeted them with a very professional warmth. They were shown to a table far at the back, where the light was of a thin, caramel milkiness, and the banquette seating and diminutive table closed them in upon each other. They sat face to face, rather than side by side, and for the first time that visit he could look her straight in the face. The menu proffered by the lanky blond boy allowed her to avoid his gaze.

He ordered an 'Australian beer', and she took the tea that she preferred. She ordered a bowl of twice-fried potatoes, and a tasting plate of prosciuttos and fresh mozzarellas, with caperberries on the side. He listened passively to her confident order and showed no sign of being irritated by the lack of consultation. He liked salty, she knew that. In her head she said the word for it in his language. It referenced the heart—like the term 'hearty': a stock, a stew, a roast, or the way you can hold a person.

Of course, he'd emailed her the day *after* Janie had left. The kitchen had still been strewn with packing tape and debris, the entrails of a separation. For the last fifteen years his emails had arrived like that, like clockwork. There had been dozens of these day-after missals. Post-breakdown, post-crisis,

post-devastating-conversation correspondences. They were a confirmation, never a portent. The two of them were never in regular contact at those times. Often there'd been months of nothing, sometimes years with no word. He never knew anything of her situation, yet he would email, and it would arrive like a steam engine, punctual and with every detail gleaming.

The silence was killing her, so affecting cheeky charm, she prompted, 'So what's the present you promised me, then?'

He put the beer down, stared at the vertical lines he'd traced in the condensation, and through an unconvincing grin, replied: 'Well, semen.'

Right then her tea arrived. It consisted of a number of elements and accessories—a glass pot, with a metal strainer in the spout, an elaborate cup and saucer, a tiny glass jug with milk and a side of honey, which she'd specified. She smiled because you had to, up into the face of the waitress—a roundish girl in a velvet frock, with a self-conscious bob.

'What are you talking about?' she demanded, when they were alone again, and too loudly. It was a shocking declaration. Wasn't it a shocking declaration? She looked around them, at others on other tables—sipping whiskys, women crossing and uncrossing legs—behaving properly. Oblivious.

'I thought you'd picked me up a little trinket in Singapore, or a pricey bottle of perfume ... but no, you thought I'd like some bodily fluids.'

She looked properly at his face, accusingly, but saw it was clouded, something heavy and sticking making his features vague and grim. *Deflated*, they always call it in novels. The person a fine membrane full of hope that suddenly loses its structure, collapses into its own fragile centre. He was playing now with the stitched corner of the heavy table linen, avoiding her eyes.

'I would like to say it's my pro-lesbian position', he said, weakly, 'but it is more complicated, although of course I am still all for lesbians.'

'Yes, I know. You never wanted to rob the world of a lesbian. I do remember ...' It came out sounding angry. Still so angry. She suddenly wished she'd never replied to the email. *Let him come here on business. Why should we see each other, there is nothing there. There is something tawdry in this dragging-out of things.*

'It's Eva,' he said, interrupting her spiralling. 'She has had to have the surgery to remove the womb. We didn't want children, anyway. Well, I didn't want. I love her, of course I do ... She found out four months ago. It happened one month ago. I told her I am here for a conference and a workshop. And she is absent, these days, didn't question me ...'

'Well, what *are* you here for?'

He looked at her with a look the closest to pleading she'd ever seen. 'Please, Eloise,' he stammered, and then took a long swig of his beer.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror panelling. Her straight auburn hair fell to the middle of her back, somehow striking, but her pale skin looked pasty rather than delicate. She pictured his dark-hair gene dominating her red-hair gene. An animated short film, with garish and terrible colours. Janie was mousey brown, had wanted children more than anything. Their endless quarrelling, and her own ambivalence. IVF scared the wits out of her. The chemicals you guzzle, the awkward invasions supposedly standing in for love-making. She wanted to tell conservatives who thought gay people should be deprived of certain privileges—legal or humanitarian—that their manoeuvrings were superfluous. The grief of never joining your faces was enough. A sufficient devastation.

But it wasn't just the medical facts. Janie just wouldn't have made a good parent. There, she'd thought it now. Sipping her pretentious tea, shame flattened her like nausea. She doubted her own capacities too, while in the scenario he was proposing, his ability to parent was an irrelevant consideration.

The tasting plate of salty things, of hearty things, arrived between them. He was distracted momentarily by the caperberries, holding them by their tails and making big, big eyes at them. 'Wow, these are amazing. Super cool. How do you eat them?' He swung them like monkeys and then caught one between his teeth.

'Excuse me,' she heard herself say, and was up at once, the elegant woman walking her way to the Ladies. She felt the eyes of men on her. She had a fleshiness that was provocative, not sloppy. It was her wide joints, and her tits, which she knew were an asset, in the grimy realm of embodied capital.

In the toilet she just sat there, with nothing in her bladder. *What if he gets up now and goes?* She ran the possibilities through her head like ticker-tape. Perhaps we will go to his hotel. Was she ovulating? Was that what this was about? It was surely a Catholic offer of the purest kind, not a chance to spend his seed for nothing. He didn't desire her, he wanted to make a baby in her body.

He wants to make a baby in my body. Her belly lurched unmistakably, and she felt it. She slammed herself into the cubicle wall, half sobbing. *Fuuuck!!*

He was staring out across the restaurant when she returned. They sat there like two strangers, like a pair of spouses. A little numb, she slurped the cold dregs from her teacup. Watching his face for clues, she suddenly clattered the cup down and shoved the paraphernalia away from her. It was pure, adolescent theatre.

'Are you angry at me?' he challenged. 'I thought that you and your girlfriend could have a child. I can't raise any child with Eva, and not ours. She can't know. But I don't want to die without children, now. Suddenly now I feel this way. I just thought of you, and then this plan. Is your girlfriend nice? Does she want a family?'

'I don't have a girlfriend any more. As of ...' and she counted days, hours. She sounded mournful, but really it was a sulk, her white rage. It would be a while until the soft, gentle weeping bit came through. Apparently that stage would be lilac, or some indigo hue, like the feature walls of New Age shops.

He motioned over the waitress and ordered another beer. She remembered him at twenty-four, his moody slides into drunkenness, still beautiful, but with a belligerent edge. She frowned as the frothy pylon arrived before him.

'So you're single then?'

'Well, yes. That is the status assigned to a person whose relationship has ended. Maybe I count as a spinster now. Being so old and all.' She regretted the bitter barb. Did she even have any eggs left? She had a vision of his sperm—they were a flashing, silvery shoal, and very healthy.

He slurped his drink, as if at a dummy, as if trying to soothe away a big dollop of disappointment. Now it was his turn for some acting-out. 'Well, I guess I can do some tourism then. See some *kan-gur-oos*. Make a surfing safari and have grilling parties.'

'They're called barbecues.'

She really did want to howl. For a pair with such an exemplary history of rhythm, his current timing was shithouse. Under the table she did sums on her fingers. When had she last bled? Had her cycle been synching with the big white clock in the sky? Four weeks exactly, or less?

'How long are you here for?' she asked.

'I'm here for four weeks.' And as if he had seen through the table surface, 'I know at least that much about women.'

Suddenly she thought of her apartment—deco, massive. It was hers.

Janie owned another property, but for the last five years she'd rented it out to international students. It was an immaculate place, no garden. Janie was staying with her sister till the renters cleared out. Then she'd set herself up there, vacuum a lot, buy expensive cut flowers and cry in the evenings. Her own place, on the other hand, had an old oak in the back yard, verdant moss on bricks. You could hang a swing off that tree.

Eloise looked at Marc. He was older, steadier, and there were considerable flecks of grey around the temples. He looked back at her now and held her eye.

Softly she said, 'So how you been, Marc?'

A bill was discreetly placed in front of them. On a glass plate, with a card on top. She stopped his hand—*I invite you*—and he paused, waited, then tucked the souvenir business card into his jacket pocket, while she rummaged for cash.

'Oh, you know. Same things. Wondering about my life, fantasising about other women. Cooking a lot. I kayak now, on the river back home. We have three dogs. They are very silly and I like them, sort of.'

It was so good to hear him talk. His inflections, the close-to-but-not-quite-perfect syntax, the way he bobbed his head of hair and broke into unexpected grins. People stay the same, she thought, it's just that life rolls over them, kneads them into different versions. His face scrunched and smoothed with his intonation. His wide hands gesticulated a little chaotically, but with so much grace. Suddenly she wanted to order five more teas and curl up against the banquettes. To talk the way they had in those seven other countries. To fight, even. They'd been so good at that. But his eyes were drooping, and he was slurring words.

She wriggled out of the banquette and, standing, smoothed the creases in her woollen dress over a flat stomach.

'What happens now?' he asked.

She slid her arms into her pale coat. She'd done the sums. Knew the exact night that she'd stopped at the late-night chemist last month.

'Now', she replied very simply, 'we drive you back to your hotel.' M