

Emily Perkins – Open Division, 2nd Place

The Warning

They went driving in the mid-semester break, so that Scott could ignore emails from fretting third-years for a week. Dee had plotted the itinerary, booking Airbnbs and small-town motels. The fruit season was over, and the first snow was still a month away. They drove past apricot orchards with slanted light blazing through the leaves, and through lunar landscapes that rose out of beech forest, a river tracking their path, now on the left of them, now on the right, though she couldn't remember going over any bridges. On their last day, Dee drove too fast up to a set of road works and the stop-go man said, 'If there was a cop here he'd have your licence, no warning given.'

On the dark, rocky hill above Alexandra a giant clock face – just a circle of dots to mark the hours, and two long white hands – was embedded below a large white Christian cross. They walked along the riverbank, in and out of trees, for about half an hour – she didn't check the big clock – and the only person they encountered was a man cutting up branches with a silent electric chainsaw.

'If I were walking along here on my own,' she said to Scott after they'd passed him, 'I would be freaking out.'

'Yeah,' said Scott. 'It's always funny when you're on a path you don't know.'

'Very funny,' she said. 'Hilarious.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Right. I get it.'

The path forked at a sign that said 'River pools 20 minutes' and they went that way, though she thought there wouldn't be time to get there and back before the sun went down, and they had to find their hotel in the dark and check in. It was the most expensive place they'd booked; for their last night she'd decided to splurge.

A bit further on they came to a gap in the trees, and stopped to watch the black swans on the river.

'Swans are disturbing when you think about it,' she said. 'Those necks.'

'What have you got against mating for life?'

She smiled. They had both been married to other people, and had children with them. Scott's fourteen-year-old daughter Sally was at her mum's for the holidays, and Dee's son, twenty now, had left home. She'd had him young. Dee and

Scott weren't married to each other. It had only been a few months, but she felt around him a dark plunge of longing that sometimes frightened her. Perhaps it wasn't love yet, but she knew she'd handed some of her sense of self over to him already.

Anyway, she wasn't sure she'd get married again. Scott might be the kind of man who was better if you weren't married to him.

Scott had recently had Covid, and he still got tired easily, so when they finished looking at the swans and he glanced down the path in the direction of the pools, then back into the trees, the way they had come, she said, 'Do you want to head back?'

'It's getting dark. Maybe we should.'

'Not the pools,' Dee said, as if she were someone else talking to them in the future. 'You didn't miss the pools.'

'The pools are amazing.'

'Best thing about Alexandra is the pools. You've gotta see them.'

'Cop'll have your licence, Delilah, no warning given.'

Scott had found out from her contract, which had been left out on the administrator's desk, that her full name was Delilah. After her guest talk on film editing, he'd walked her to the street and invited her to have a drink that night.

'You can tell me about your name.'

'My parents had me when they were twenty,' she'd said. It was her stock answer.

'Ah,' he'd said. 'Well it explains a lot.'

'Like what?'

'Your steeliness. You have to counteract Delilah.' He held her gaze.

'Is that a compliment?' she'd asked.

He'd said, 'Definitely.'

The man with the chainsaw was still there, the tray of his ute neatly stacked with branches.

'Hooroo,' said Scott. Since they had been in the countryside he had peppered his speech with the phrases of a 1950s farmer. When the electric car they had wanted to hire was unavailable he'd said he was 'browned off'. Dee tucked it away in her small purse of consolations, should he ever break up with her. Doesn't speak in the

mornings. Can't walk as far as me. And there was the thing from the night before, which she was still weighing up.

The man gave no sign to acknowledge their presence.

'Do you think he works for the council?' Dee asked when they were out of earshot.

'Absolutely not.'

Yesterday they had been in the Catlins, and spent the afternoon waiting for the tide to recede and reveal the petrified forest at Curio Bay. It was the right time of year for Hector's dolphins, but they didn't see any.

'How can we just let something go extinct?' she said. It was rhetorical.

The water peeled back and Jurassic forest rock spread before them in plates and scales. Scott pointed out the grooves of tree bark. Lumpy rocks became tree stumps before her eyes. A hundred and eighty million years! She'd never been anywhere like it – like a cathedral of time – and she looked up at Scott and saw that he was as moved by it as she was.

'Trees turning into rock,' she said. 'It blows my mind.'

She was worried he'd want to move on too quickly, but they stayed there a long time in perfect silence, and there was space to soak it in. On the way back to the car they held hands.

That night she had gone into the motel bathroom to change before bed. Every other night of the trip they had undressed and slept naked, but since Scott had been ill they hadn't had sex. Now she put on the thigh-high stockings she'd brought with her and went back to the small, low-ceilinged room. She stood in front of the bed.

'Well,' Scott put down his phone. 'Wow.'

'You're not going to like where I bought them.'

'I think I like everything about them.'

'They're from that anti-vax boutique. The Covid deniers.'

Scott nodded, his eyes moving up and down her body. 'Delilah the Covid denier,' he said. 'It tracks.'

'Yeah,' she said, and took a step closer so that her legs pressed against the edge of the bed. 'It's a hoax. The plandemic. Science isn't real.'

He leaned forward and slid a hand up between her thighs. ‘Come here Delilah. I’m going to fuck that hoax right out of you.’

She should have left it there. But when they were fucking, and she could sense he was close, she said, low in his ear, ‘Delilah’s one of your students.’ And he’d groaned – like he’d caught himself by surprise – and come in a series of hard, unrestrained thrusts.

She woke in the middle of the night to go to the loo. Afterwards she opened the door of their unit and stood on the concrete stoop, looking up at the sheer blackness, feeling as if she could see a curve in it. It was hard to sleep after that. The state highway was right outside, and every now and then she could hear a truck thundering down.

The walk back along the river to the car felt shorter, as return journeys always did. Dee’s impulse to say that thing about being a student troubled her; she wasn’t sure what it meant about her, or what his response meant about him, or if any of it meant anything at all beyond the feeling of breath, the sound of a voice inside an ear, a body inside a body.

They reached the Alexandra hotel just as it was getting dark. It was quite a way out of town, so far that Dee was convinced they’d overshot, down a long drive off the main road, and slightly less nice than it had looked on its website. They were not the only guests – a small hatchback and a green-and-purple rental van were parked outside. The proprietor, a long-legged older man in a Navy surplus sweater, showed them around. As he did, it dawned on Dee that this wasn’t really a hotel in the familiar sense, but a converted house.

The living room, which he showed them through a doorway, was decorated in the brown and beige neutrals of an old folks’ home, and adorned with all kinds of trinkets – beaten copper plates, fishing posters and fringed antimacassars. Dee could smell food cooking – something winey and Italian. They could hear voices coming from elsewhere, upstairs perhaps, or outside. The walls were thin.

The owner pressed them for details of their lives – where they lived, what they did for work, why they had come here on holiday – as he showed them the breakfast room, then up some stairs and past three closed, numbered doorways – presumably other guest rooms – to a bedroom. Dee found herself not wanting to give him information. She couldn’t say why this was, but she let Scott do the talking. The man

opened the door and strode in ahead of them, as if he were the one staying here. They followed him with their bags.

‘Here’s your en suite,’ he said, opening another door. ‘And here’s your view. For the morning.’ He drew back the curtain, but all they could see were their own reflections in the dark glass, the proprietor spindly and tall between them.

He leaned against their doorway and casually gestured a thumb over the landing.

‘I’m just there,’ he said. ‘If you need anything. You’re joining us for dinner? Seven p.m., or 6.30 if you want a drink.’

This hadn’t been mentioned in the booking. Dee felt panic at the thought of having to eat with him and other guests.

‘We’ve got a booking in town,’ she said. ‘It’s the last night of our holiday. I hope that doesn’t put you out.’

‘Oh,’ he said. He shrugged. ‘I’ll give your serving to the dog then.’

She pressed the side of her foot against Scott’s. ‘Ha ha,’ she said. ‘Lucky dog.’

‘Where’s your reservation?’

‘I can’t remember the name of it,’ Scott said, smoothly. ‘Looks good though.’

‘Be careful coming back,’ said the man. ‘It’s easy to miss the driveway.’

‘Fuck. What was that?’ Dee whispered after checking the door was locked. ‘This is giving me the shits.’

‘He’s weird,’ said Scott. ‘Like a boat captain puppet come to life.’

‘Look.’ She pointed at the mantelpiece, on which sat a white bust of a naked woman, her shoulders tilted provocatively, her somehow pornographic breasts with erect nipples resting on the shelf, as if the lower part of her body had been vanished in some magician’s trick. ‘Is that art?’ The woman’s mouth was open in a terrible smile.

Scott started laughing and she shushed him.

‘I can’t look at that,’ she said, and went to get a towel from the bathroom to drape over it.

But in the bathroom a creeping feeling came over her as soon as she looked in the mirror. People put cameras in places like this. She’d read about it. He was exactly the type to put a camera behind the mirror. Don’t ask how she knew – she just knew. She saw herself looking afraid, and stuck out her tongue.

‘Do you want me to move it?’ Scott asked, one hand on the woman’s naked shoulder. ‘It’s surprisingly heavy.’

‘My god no,’ she said. ‘What if you break it?’

And she placed the towel carefully over the woman’s head and tucked in the edges around the back of the bust.

Instantly, the room seemed to belong to normality again. It was just her and Scott. Real people, in a funny old place. And they’d go and get fish and chips and have a couple of beers and in the morning they’d leave and tomorrow night she would be sleeping in her own bed.

‘Much better.’

Drinks were in full swing as they passed the living room on their way out the door.

‘There they are!’ cried the sea captain, breaking off from a conversation with two elderly ladies. On the other side of the room, two couples in their thirties glanced over from a game of Sequence.

‘Hi,’ Dee said. ‘This looks cosy.’

‘Your loss,’ he said. ‘We’re having some delicious local wine. But I don’t suppose you’ll even join us for a drink.’

‘Well,’ Scott began, looking at Dee questioningly, ‘we could...’

‘No, sorry,’ she said. ‘They won’t hold the reservation.’

‘Ah, a serious place,’ said the proprietor. ‘I rang my friend Alfredo who owns the bistro in town, in case that’s where you were heading. I was going to say, make sure you give my guests Dee and Scott special service. But he’d never heard of you.’

‘No it’s not Alfredo’s,’ she said. ‘I just can’t remember the name.’

‘Good luck finding it then,’ said the proprietor, and turned back to the older women. ‘They’ve got better things to do.’ And he gave a jaunty laugh.

They ate burgers at the rest area where they had parked earlier that day, and looked over the grey ruffled river to the houses twinkling on the other side. A clutch of swans drifted down, black hooks against the water. On the rocky hillside, moonlight caught the hands of the clock and the cross. The temperature was dropping.

‘You’re brilliant,’ Scott said. ‘I don’t know if I could lie on the spot like that.’

‘I didn’t enjoy doing it. I’m scared of him.’

‘Nah, he’s just eccentric.’

‘I think he’s got cameras in the bathroom.’

Scott laughed, and it turned into a cough.

‘Did we overdo it today?’ Dee asked.

He shook his head. ‘Fuck this.’

‘At least you’re immune for a bit.’

‘I could get it again. They say every time it does more organ damage. Your brain shrinks. Do you think this is what’s going to happen to the human race, we’re just going to get virus after virus and gradually become more and more suboptimal? Do you think humans have peaked?’

‘It’s a hoax, remember,’ she said, stretching her legs out on the grassy bank. But he didn’t move towards her.

‘Maybe that’s what gods are,’ she said. ‘Maybe when we were ancient people we didn’t have illnesses, and we were optimal, and strong, and clever, and gradually as we had to deal with sickness we crumbled a little bit and then the stories about our ancestors seemed so amazing we had to imagine they were better than human, and that’s why we invented gods. Maybe future generations with their shrunken Covid brains will think we were godlike.’

‘Or maybe viruses are the gods,’ he said. ‘And we’re just the planets they’re trashing. Maybe we’ll slowly transform into something else, like that forest. Maybe in a million years a new species will come and look at us and experience a...’ His voice changed. ‘It was a kind of holy moment,’ he said. ‘Down there at Curio Bay. Wasn’t it.’

‘I love you,’ she said. ‘Oh. I didn’t know I was going to say that. I didn’t know I felt it.’

She rolled over and lay on her stomach, needing to hug the earth. He pulled her over so her head was in his lap.

‘We’re just getting to know each other,’ he said. ‘But I like you, Delilah. You get an A.’

She would have had sex there on the riverbank, except dew had seeped through their jeans and it would be crazy for Scott to get sick again now. They drove back slowly, not wanting to miss the driveway, and Dee felt increasing dread as the town receded behind them, until it was darkness and trees all around, and the rocky hillsides, which she knew were there but couldn’t see.

But a little light was on at the roadside letterbox, and reflective strips guided them the length of the drive to the house, where another light shone from the porch, welcoming.

The key worked, and they trod as quietly as they could through the dim hallway, past the closed door to the living room. She thought she could hear a television, faintly, but couldn't tell which direction it was coming from. Other than that the house was silent, and there were no strips of light beneath the doorways of the other bedrooms. Everyone must have gone to sleep.

She paused outside their room. 'Is this definitely it?'

Scott nodded, and Dee put the key to the lock.

Inside, she turned on the light.

The bed had been turned down. A foil covered chocolate sat on each pillow.

'He's been in here,' she said to Scott. 'Fuck.'

Their bags were untouched though, still sitting unopened under the window, where he'd tried to show them the view.

'Go and look in the bathroom,' she said to Scott.

'What for?'

'In case someone's there.'

Of course there wasn't. But how could she go in there, how could she take her clothes off in this place – she would sleep in her jeans. She couldn't explain it.

Something else was different too. Scott flushed the loo and came out of the bathroom drying his hands on the towel and then she realised that the woman on the mantelpiece was gone.

'Scott!' She pointed.

'Oh,' he said. 'Whoa.'

In the bust's place was a vase, in a gaudy, orange-swirled Venetian style glass. As if it were a law of nature that something had to sit on that fucking mantelpiece. She felt a surge of dread, and something like shame, that the man knew she hadn't wanted to look at the naked woman, that the towel had been prissy, the sign of a small, prudish mind.

'Why did he do that?' she asked.

Scott shook his head. 'Maybe he was trying to make us more comfortable.'

'I don't like that he was in here.'

Instinct drove her to the wardrobe and she flung it open and sure enough, the woman was in there on the floor, towelless, facing away from the door into the back of the cupboard, so that now you could see there was no real back of her head. The plaster simply tapered off, as if behind the face and smile and breasts she was nothing but a melting ice-cream cone. Dee felt alone, and cold, as if she were the only woman in the world, and there was just her, and Scott, and the tall man.

‘We have to go,’ she said. ‘We have to go.’

‘What?’

‘I can’t stay here.’ They were both whispering. ‘I can’t stay here, please Scott, please, we have to go.’

‘Where? Where will we go?’

‘I don’t care. Let’s just drive. We can sleep on the side of the road.’

‘I’m not well, I don’t want to sleep in the car.’

‘Or a hotel in Queenstown, there’ll be something by the airport, I can’t stay here.’

‘We’ve already paid for this place.’

It was then she saw he had his toothbrush in his hand and was half undressed.

‘Please Scott. Please.’

Their bags felt extra heavy as they tried to get them across the landing and down the stairs without bumping anything, and her heart pounded so hard she thought she might be sick. Scott, thank god, was just behind her, and had good control of his movements – she trusted him not to make a noise.

At last they were in the entry hall and she could see the front door, the porch light shining softly through the slim window beside it. As they passed the reception table, covered in local brochures and area maps, she remembered the key clutched in her sweaty hand and put it down there, hoping the man would see it in the morning and not think they had stolen anything. He had her email address and she never wanted to hear from him again.

On the other side of the front door the night rushed coolly and blessedly around her. She had entered another space – a primal, timeless state in which she no longer cared if she were being rational or deluded, she simply had to get out. There was the car, the beautiful beautiful car.

‘Have you got everything,’ she whispered across the driveway to Scott. ‘We can’t go back inside.’

‘Yes,’ he said. He had the car key and he clicked the remote unlock and popped up the boot, modern sounds that broke across the darkness from another age. Her mouth was bone dry. She was lifting a suitcase – so heavy – into the boot when the man said,

‘What’s going on, Scott?’

He was on Scott’s side of the car. The light of the porch didn’t reach him but he stood in the same faint glow from the parking light as Scott did, as she, at the back of the car, did too. She heaved Scott’s suitcase into the boot and shut it and went to her passenger door, the body of the car between them.

‘Get into the car,’ she said to Scott. ‘We have to go.’

‘Why did you cover the sculpture,’ the man said, looking over the roof of the car at her. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t like it.’

‘We didn’t want to bother you,’ she said. ‘Scott, get in the car.’

Scott opened the driver’s door. Why wasn’t she driving? She had driven too fast up to those road works and Scott had done all the driving since.

‘Where are you going?’ the sea captain said. He had his hand on the car door.

‘Our daughter’s sick,’ she said. It was the first thing that came into her head. ‘She’s having an asthma attack. We have to go to her.’

‘Scott?’ the man said. ‘Why are you lying to me?’

‘We’re not lying.’ She nearly shouted it. ‘Our daughter is sick. She’s sick. We have to go. Why are you trying to stop us?’

The man stepped back, a tiny step, but enough to enable Scott to open the door and slide into the driver’s seat. She got into the passenger seat at the same time. ‘Lock the doors,’ she said. Scott turned on the ignition and the car lurched forward, and the man drew back, and she wouldn’t turn her head to look at him or his house as they drove forward into the grey light, the hedges close either side of them, she wouldn’t turn back. She prayed for the car to handle the rutted drive, for there to be no gate at the end – she couldn’t remember a gate, but she hadn’t paid close enough attention. Her heart was wild in her chest, she was all liquid adrenaline, she couldn’t imagine ever calming down.

There was no gate, just the road, the calm, empty road, and Scott turned onto it and headed back in the direction they had come from after eating burgers, and the

man and the house seemed to seal off, and belong to another world. But the adrenaline still coursed through her. She hunted in the foot well for the water bottle that she'd left there, and gulped at the water.

'Do you want some?' she offered it to Scott. He took a sip.

'Why did you say that,' he asked.

There were the lights of Alexandra. There was the clock and there was the cross. She didn't want to stay here tonight either. Her phone was in her hand and she was already searching for other towns, other hotels, although really she would rather drive all the way to Queenstown and never leave this car.

'Say what?' She imagined the man ahead of them on the road, at the entrance to the town, looming on his never-ending legs at the next gas station they would have to stop at. At the airport. Inside her emails. She was terrified of him and she didn't know how to stop being terrified. She twisted, the seatbelt scratching her neck, to check the darkness of the back seat. He seemed capable of anything.

'About my daughter having asthma. You know Sally has asthma. Why did you say that, it's like a curse.'

She turned to Scott. He was squinting at the road.

'I forgot,' she said. 'I panicked. I didn't mean Sally, I meant some invented child that we might have.'

'We'll never have a child,' he said.

'Of course not,' she said, 'of course we won't, I just had to tell him something.'

'I don't get it,' said Scott. 'I don't understand you.'

At that moment she realised the fear was still with her. It was in the car. They drove over the river on a bumpy bridge. She looked at the flat red and green lights of the shopping precinct as they skirted the town and drove on, through the massive, night-shrouded countryside, towards the next town. Her greatest fear was that Scott would stop the car.