

In Our/My Bedroom

The bed is empty, the blanket flat and smoothed. Cars and trucks that used to romp over the fabric – blue, green, red – now queue up in neat rows, uncrumpled. A child's blanket, a child's bed. Deserted.

Are you warm in your new bed, high up in the attic of a cold boarding-house? Does the clock tick as loudly for you as it does for me, in our twin silences, our separate rooms? This place was once *our* bedroom, not merely mine. Our two beds stand side by side, parted by a gap that we used to be able to bridge if we just reached out our hands across the divide. Now one side of the bridge is gone.

Standing in the doorway, I look around. Five horses prance across the wall, bay and white and chestnut, living on canvas in pencil and watercolour and acrylic paint. Those five horses span five years, each artwork your gift to me for five successive birthdays. The most recent of them you presented to me only last year. It is wonderfully vivid, witness to your maturing skill – poised mid-movement, eyes liquid and warm. The whole bedroom is still alive with your presence, as though you left a minute ago, as though in a minute you will return and knock on the door and say our secret passwords: *tomato juice* and *puppy*. I never wondered, why those words? In their exquisite arbitrariness they were merely another part of our vocabulary, the arcane, esoteric language no one spoke but us.

If people are puzzles, then you and I were two adjacent pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, locked together, formed to fit each other from the time of our manufacturing. Brother and sister, older and younger. The placid and the fiery. Who knows how many quarrels your peaceful nature helped us avoid? One thing's for sure: left to me, we would have been bickering constantly over any little thing – how dogs' hindquarters should be drawn, whose turn it was to wipe the windows, and whether to cook long-grained or short-grained rice.

I draw the curtains. The last light of day bleeds away from the windows, and a quietness closes over the room. In autumn as the days shortened and the sun started to set earlier, we'd go up the road to walk in the pine forest at evening. Even then I was filled with wonder, sharply aware of the mutability of those precious moments. I'd try to memorise the way the sunlight filtered through the treetops in shining shafts. The way the tips of the grass were irradiated with fleeting golden gleams. The way you'd jump at stray cats streaking suddenly out of the dusk nearly under your feet. I would laugh, and you would laugh, and we'd talk about jump-scares. That was our favourite time

for walking – the magic hour of twilight, that brief golden hour which was ever as evanescent as our years together proved to be.

“Make sure you tell Hippo.” Lying awake at one o’ clock, I once heard the words leave your sleeping lips, oddly clear and distinct. I sat up and peered into the dark, wondering if you were awake too. Hippo. The name evokes the image of a baggy brown stuffed toy hippo, small enough to be cradled in the palm of your hand, but twenty-two years old – older than both of us. Stuffed toy animals used to sprawl over our beds in happy, careless abandon. They were baptised in stories, soaked in helpless side-splitting belly-hurting laughter. Now they are crammed in a box under your empty bed. Parted from his companions, sharing your exile in that boarding-house in the city, Hippo sleeps under your unfamiliar pillow, patient, waiting to be noticed again.

Where have all our stories gone? – the stories in which our stuffed animals took on life and personalities? Hippo was best friends with Golden Grass, the dog whose name (as we’d explain to everyone) was chosen because her fur was golden and looked like grass. And what a paragon of virtue was Admiral Korora, more intimately known as Peep-peep. That little blue penguin, so rigorously teetotal and addicted to ice baths, who so jealously guarded Yups, that lamb of delicate constitution! Never was there a greater state of marital bliss than theirs. And never was there a jollier owl than Ruru the fat and fluffy, whose puppet head turned round and round, 360 degrees ad infinitum. Epic was the struggle between his love of beer and beef jerky and his wish to be aerodynamic enough to fly.

Our stories needed two to tell. Needed the weaving in and out of character voices, the sparking of spontaneous quips and puns, the mysterious amalgam of two temperaments. The tossing of the ball of dialogue back and forth until we realised we were both voicing the same character by mistake, and the mirth that followed.

And that last night, how normal and yet not normal everything was! Lying in bed and chatting of cabbages and kings till long past midnight. The raps on the door, our mum’s harsh whisper: “Go to sleep!” Lowering our voices to whispers as we continued, fellow conspirators. Talking until yawns supplied punctuation. Confidences in the soft enfolding darkness, murmured at the very cusp of slumber. And then, the next night, in the bedroom that was no longer ours, only stillness...

The bed on the other side of the room, vacant. The ticking of the clock, never before noticed. Now each stroke sounds like it is measuring the ever-increasing distance in time and space you are from me. Will things ever be just as they were before? You may come back for visits, but an epoch is past. The Epoch of the Conjoined ‘Twins’. Now they have been sawn apart.

“I’ve never seen one of you without the other.” That is what our mutual friends used to say; all our friends were mutual. In a way, it was like protection. “Bare is back without brother behind it,” went the old Norse proverb, and so I used to cling to you like a limpet to a rock. There was no one else for a long time, no one who made it past the outer circle of mere acquaintanceship. We were friendly with many kids – friendly, but not friends. We lived our childhood for a few years in one place, then moved on, and on again. Never putting out roots deeper than the surface of the soil. From Singapore, to the North Island, to the South Island. From the metropolis, to the smaller city, to no city at all. The succession of bedrooms we shared also became smaller and smaller – absurdly, in inverse proportion to our growth.

As homeschooled kids, we seldom met others of our age. And even when we did, it was hardly better. We were always the new kids, the awkward ones who hung around on the edge of conversations or drifted from group to group, trying to think of something to say, trying to fit in and be accepted into the clique. Good heavens, those cliques! We met them everywhere. Wherever there were people, always there would be little knots of cronies huddled here and there, bound together by shared experience and the security of long acquaintance. Too young, too callow to open up to outsiders. We resented cliques, yet we were one ourselves.

Never really part of the Kiwi crowd, with our yellow faces and foreign accents. They’d say “pin” instead of “pen”, and we’d say, “What?” And then, as we grew more Westernised, never really part of the Asian crowd either. I hated the feeling that people glancing at us would immediately, automatically class us as ignorant Chinese tourists here for a month’s holiday. Foreign in the land we now called home. And the irony of it all was that we didn’t even speak Mandarin fluently.

No, our home has long since ceased to be in that country across the sea. Our home is here, in the rural countryside. Every forest we explored was enchanted; every creek bubbled over with the waters of eternal youth. We wandered in a fantasy land together, a land of hills and valleys filled with mist, a place where one could be alone but not lonely. You were a Knight; I was a Lady. For swords you had reeds; for robes I had the wind. There was a little gorge we used to haunt, with a trickle of water running through it under the willows’ feathery embrace. They stood like stately ladies with cool murmurous voices, tresses rustling in the wind, limbs lithe and graceful. I called the place the Valley of the Singing Gold. I wished we could stay there forever.

But life is movement, life is change. The light of the bedside lava lamp dances on the wall, a thousand glittering motes of light thrown like sparks into the shadows. It dances like the wraith of time – flickering in the corner of your eye, unheeded until the lamp is switched off and it’s gone. The day of your departure crept up on us in that way. One moment it was all play and aimless chatter; the next, our life-goals separating, condensing and narrowing down to fine points. Suddenly

it was time for new things – public school for me, college for you. You started wearing jeans instead of sweatpants. Your hair acquired a sculpted crest through the constant combing of your fingers; stopped resembling the helmet of a foot guard at Buckingham Palace. You got a new wristwatch, a man’s watch, hard and glinting, to replace the small blue plastic one you’d worn for years as a boy.

As you text about all the new things happening every day, I wonder, are you growing up and away from me? Now you have friends of your own, cool friends who talk with esoteric nods and gestures just like we used to. They come to visit. I talk to them, too, but I always feel like the baby sister. Doubt nags at me like an old earworm that loops endlessly. Am I part of the group only on sufferance? Would you rather hang out alone with them, unburdened of me? Do you still care about us?

Later, back in our bedroom the night before you return to the city, you confess that you don’t follow their chat, don’t feel in on it either. “Hippo’s getting amnesia,” you say. “GG’s been away too long.”

“Sounds like we need – open surgery!”

“Better wake Yups up then. Just don’t wear a dagger in thy helmet.”

The comforting familiarity of inside jokes and obscure references wraps around me like a security blanket. Once again I feel the reassuring warmth of all our shared history. It is a bulwark between us and the baffled world. With the turn of a phrase, the inflection of a word, the alliance is back again, and all is well. I look at you and see the boy of sixteen, of eighteen, not the twenty-year-old who moved away.

Yes. After all, you’re still fundamentally the same person, under the cool denim jacket and stylish wristwatch. The same sweet-tempered, quick-witted big brother. You still get my references, though no one else does.

Maybe you left your childhood behind when you went to the city, entered the strange new world of college which I cannot yet join. Maybe we are indeed becoming separate, distinct, reconstructing ourselves. And maybe that is good.

But I look around our bedroom and see the horses on the wall, the toys under your bed, and the hodgepodge of boyish treasures crammed into the top drawer of the bedside table we shared. As I see these things, I know, in a strange, small way, that you are still with me. “With” me even though you’re not here; “with” me in the sense that one uses the phrase “I’m with you”. Though we may be apart now, we are still *conjoined* – in understanding, in affection, in support. The bond unbroken, strengthened and renewed every time you come back. And you will.