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Creative Writing (Prose) Section
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Filipa Bellette

‘Kay, it’s Avie – she’s with *them*.
‘What are you talking about Mother?’
‘Them next door – she’s with *them* – eating *their* food!’
‘Calm down, Mother, you’ll burst your hernia.’
‘This is serious, Kay...Don’t you sigh at me! You need to come home right now.’

Pause. Another sigh. ‘I’ll be there in ten.’

Kay glanced at her computer screen. 4:55pm. Almost knock-off time, anyway. She grabbed her keys and handbag from her office desk and made her way to the car. She was not at all surprised to get such a phone call from her mother. It was only a matter of time until she found *something* to get her knickers in a knot about. Ever since the new family moved in next door, Mother had been watching them like a hawk, muttering that soon the whole city would be swarming with them, them with all their ratty kids running round as if they’ve been breeding like rabbits. Mother’s fidgety spying-through-the-window had only gotten worse since the news clip on the telly the other week. Kay remembered it, the hazy footage captured on a security camera. She could almost smell the sweat and wildness of it: the bloodied mess of a whiskered man’s face, obscured by the fists and boots of hooded black bodies.

The moment Kay pulled up Mother came storming, in her stiff hobbling way, out of the house and down the cracked path. She practically yanked her daughter from the car, as if Kay failed to see the urgency of the matter. It was beyond her as to why her mother didn’t just go over there next door and get Avie herself. Principle, Mother would’ve answered abstractly, her lips pinched in like an over-dried date. *It’s the principle of the thing.* What principle she was referring too, Kay could only imagine. Perhaps it was her mother’s belief that she might be tainted by them if she happened to edge too close.

‘Look, Avie’s there!’ Mother pointed a crooked arthritic finger towards the neighbours’ lounge-room window, and then she heaved her tub-shaped chest in the air as if she were getting ready for a brawl. ‘To think my own granddaughter would choose *them* over *me.*’ She waggled her finger at her daughter as she used to when Kay misbehaved as a child. ‘Told you it would be the wrong move letting Avie catch the bus with that lot. The *wrooong* move.’

Kay shook her head at her mother and rolled her eyes. But Mother kept at it. ‘You never know what she might get mixed up in over there, Kay. Come back speaking some gibberish language. There’s even one of those hooligans over there. That one with the scar on his cheek. I bet I know exactly how *that* got there.’

Kay began to feel as if her nerves had just been attached to a high-voltage fuse-box. They always did when her mother got all worked up like this. She was sure someone passing by would hear. But it wasn’t just Mother who had tightened her nerves, sharp like a pin. It was also that news footage that arose in her mind again, almost instinctively with her mother’s reference to the scar: the crowbar, how it
glittered in the streetlight, the scuffling of feet disappearing round a corner, the whiskered man’s body splayed out like a hanky.

She turned her back to her mother and tried to block her (and the horrid news image) out. Through the window of the neighbours’ house she could make out the shape of her daughter. The teenage boy was there too – the one Mother was huffing and puffing about – and a bunch of other younger Sudanese kids. He was a well-dressed boy, corduroy slacks and a polo top. Hardly a ‘hooligan.’ And besides, there were so many other ways someone could be marred with a scar. They did escape a war, after all. She watched as the boy swooped down and grabbed one of the kids. A perfect grin spread across his face as the little girl held high in his arms squealed with laughter. Upon straining her eyes, it was evident to Kay that Avie was ok – more than ok, really. Her head was bobbing with the rhythm of laughter, her mouth a grinning shape of delight as she watched the boy and the little girl spin in circles.

It was an undeniable fact that her daughter was happy to be there – over there, in there – with them. Much happier to be over there with them than she had been in her own home. Not that she could blame her, what with the incessant verbal tornado that Mother had turned into since the Sudanese family had moved in. It was true that Kay herself had been working longer hours at the office, reluctant to go home to their house, thick and rich with tension.

Her husband, Patrick, had also reached the end of his tether. He was the quiet, pensive type. Would rather get lost in one of his woodwork projects than have to bother with an unpredictable human. But just the other night, when her mother had been harping on about them next door chewing up all our tax-payers’ money, he had stood up from the couch and lurched at her, his beet-red face mere millimetres from hers, and said in a voice that could splinter, ‘what are you so afraid of, old woman?’ Before Mother could reply, before she could even remove his fleck of spit from off her cheek with the scrunched up tissue stuck up her sleeve, he took off to his workshop out the back.

Kay knew he’d be in there, carving another African sculpture. He loved Africa, ever since his backpacker days before they were married. The house was filled with them, all his meticulous Tasmanian Blackwood carvings. Brawny lions, bare-breasted women, thin, sinewy men with spears. They were beautiful, she had to admit. But since the arrival of the new neighbours those exotic bits of wood had begun to unsettle her, charged with the same tension that swamped the air. It almost seemed as if they had come to life, breathing and moving, taking over, having the ability to change you. She wondered if the neighbours could see her husband’s handiwork through the windows. She wondered if they thought them an invitation to visit uninvited. Or did they smirk at them, turn their noses up at them, as if they saw a clumsy man’s attempt to capture them?

After Patrick left the room that night, Mother stood with her whole face puckered in as if she’d suddenly swallowed her tongue. There was silence. At last, glorious silence! But it didn’t last long. Mother started spluttering an incomprehensible string of words. She seized one of Patrick’s blackwood figures in her flaky hands and hurled it across the room, barely missing Avie who had been sitting as small as a pip, completely unnoticed, staring and fragile as if the thick air might crush her cheeks. Mother was too distracted unleashing her tongue, but Kay saw it, how Avie slid to the ground, as quiet as a slipper, and picked the carving up.

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She cradled it to her chest, as if it were alive and real, in a way that only unsettled Kay further.

From the driveway, Kay strained to see her daughter through the neighbours’ window. She watched as Avie’s pale moon face (how white she looked inside that house) gleamed at the boy and the other wide-eyed, bright-toothed children. And then the group of them huddled together as if they were one and the same body looking at something held in the palm of the boy’s hands. The reflection on the window was such that Kay could not distinguish what he was holding, and strangely, this frustrated her.

She knew she should be filled with a sense of relief to see Avie content, perhaps even quietly proud that she had defied Mother’s tornado remarks, but the fact that she was out here, while Avie was in there, the fact that it was not Kay that had Avie smiling, made her feel as if there was a fist lodged inside her throat. It was as if her daughter was slipping away from her hands, as if her whole world as she knew it was slipping away, and without any warning all she could think about was the news-clip image of the hazy figure left with his barely shallow breathing. She suddenly felt herself turning into some kind of protective dog, growling over a saliva-marked bone. It was this – and not Mother’s impatient nudge – that had Kay marching towards the neighbours’ home.

She knocked on the door three times. A spicy, foreign scent wafted from inside. A woman answered. Her face peered, cautiously, around the door as if this unexpected knock might hurt her. Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper. ‘Hello?’

Kay attempted a polite smile. ‘Hi, I’m looking for my daughter Avie.’

‘Oh! You Avie’s mama?’ The woman brightened, her face suddenly warm and open as if she’d just bumped into a long lost friend. She stepped out from behind the door, revealing a round homely body. Kay couldn’t help but notice the way her pair of waist-high jeans bulged tight over a belly that had borne too many children. ‘Oh welcome to you,’ the woman said. ‘Please, come in for some tea.’

‘Oh no, no, there’s no need for that.’ Kay waved her hand as if to enforce the matter. Perhaps another day, in another time, Kay might’ve taken the woman up on the offer. Sat down with her at a faded wooden table and nattered with her about the annoying habits of their husbands, the achievements of their children. Today, however, she wanted nothing more than to grab her daughter and race her back to the sturdy walls of her own house. At least there, even there with Mother, even there with all those breathing, moving sculptures, she could keep her world intact, keep Avie by her side, keep her from becoming some foreign, unreachable thing.

And just then, it shocked her, these overprotective thoughts. She sounded just like her mother. A much more subtle version, yes, but still traces of Mother were evident. It was true that Avie’s involvement with the Sudanese family bothered her. Avie would soon, no doubt, bring them into her house. She imagined all those kids lounging on her cream leather couches, eating her expensive gourmet food, fiddling with her photos and her chinaware and her hard-cover book collection. The family had ruffled up their quiet neighbourhood too. What with their stream of never ending guests, the Friday night drumming, their healthy laughter as big as a boulder. It made the odd flitter of laughter inside her own home seem thin and measly in comparison.

She heard Mother’s leather-stretched voice, the strain of it in her head. You never know what she might get mixed up in over there, Kay. But it wasn’t quite
Mother’s voice; it was her voice as well, the two sounds grating together like a beat-up hull of a yacht against a rock. And suddenly she wished she could reach a finger inside and hook out the voice – her mother’s/her own – but she knew it wasn’t that simple. For how could one extract a voice from the depths of the mind with a hand that refused to enter?

The Sudanese woman uttered a quiet, ‘hmm,’ in response to Kay’s refusal for her tea. The noise was innocent enough, but Kay couldn’t help notice the way the woman’s lips pursed, how it drew deep wrinkles around her mouth, made her eyes, her forehead, her whole face sag to the creases that pierced her dentured chin. How many others had scarred this woman’s skin? For just one moment, she wanted to reach out and brush the worn-out creases from off her face. But then she thought of Avie inside this African woman’s house, heard the grating voices – Mother/Me/Mother/Me – and her hands remained rigid by her side.

The woman disappeared into the dark hall to fetch Avie. As she waited, a ginger kitten curled around Kay’s ankles. She wasn’t one to harm an animal, but she had a terrible urge to kick the ball of fluff from off her feet. Avie appeared at the door, along with the boy. He smiled at Kay. That perfect grin again. Healthy and big like the laughter that bowled from this house. It almost made her smile back.

Before she had a chance to tell Avie to come back home, right now, a flood of squealing kids came spilling out onto the porch. She was surrounded by them all – all these Sudanese children – threading around her an invisible piece of string as they played a game of tag. She felt tangled up in their laughter and grasping hands and their bright, winking smiles. Tangled up and losing air and yet her hands stayed like sticks by her side.

The woman hissed something at the children that Kay could not decipher and they disappeared back into the house, leaving Avie and the boy on the porch with their mothers.

Avie held up a necklace made of multi-coloured paper beads, a huge grin on her face. ‘Look what Aunty Nafy helped me make,’ she said, beaming at Kay and then at the Sudanese woman. Paper beads? It took her by surprise, these tiny, shiny cocoon-shaped bits of African art. So unpretentious, so innocent – not like the breathing, moving, exotic mass of Blackwood sculptures back in her house. Kay tried her best to inspect her daughter’s necklace with interest, but it was that word – Aunty – which left Kay’s attempt to praise her daughter’s craftwork sounding dull and hollow.

Aunty? Already Avie was calling this woman Aunty? Already she was sitting there making beads with this woman, eating her food, learning her words, laughing and living with her, while Kay herself stood rigid and unhuman, stuck in the grating wars of the voices in her mind.

‘Kay!’ It was Mother. She’d ventured over to the end of the neighbours’ driveway. Her stocky body in her faded chequered dress planted firm on the path. She wouldn’t dare inch a toe onto their territory. ‘What’s the hold up?’

She looked at her mother, was about to speak, but then she caught sight of the paper beads held in the palm of her daughter’s hand.

Could she press these voices down, press them until they were thin and evanescent?

‘Kaaay?’ Mother’s voice turned to a menacing growl, biting at the y of her
name. The Sudanese woman – Nafy, that’s what Avie had called her – edged towards the door. Her eyebrows narrowed at the old bat at the end of the driveway, and deep creases overtook her face. Again, Kay had that urge to touch her. Her hand, stiff with stricture, lifted, even if only a fraction.

It slipped out then, unbidden, but it felt warm as it passed her tongue. ‘If it’s still on offer, perhaps I will come in for a bit, for that tea?’

Nafy looked at Kay, her face still etched with the worn-out wrinkles. The boy with the scar on his cheek looked at her too. They looked at Kay with a look that made her feel as if her skin had suddenly been sliced open, exposing her soul – ugly, bare and beating. It wasn’t too late – was it? – to gather the flaps of her skin and sew herself shut and retreat back to her mother with Avie. It wasn’t too late, was it?

Nafy opened the door and stepped aside to let Kay in.

There was a bark behind her. She couldn’t look round to see if it was a dog or her mother. She didn’t dare look around. But as she walked through the door she imagined Mother, alone, out there on the pathway, dissolving on the ground, like an abandoned hanky. Left alone, on the ground, like the whiskered man in the hazy news clip footage.
Runia Reflected: Talk Amongst Outsiders in Bangladesh
Kathryn Hummel

I was in Bangladesh to write about women – or, more accurately, had returned to Bangladesh to test whether lives like Runia’s could be contained by the page. Even before I began, those surrounding me were able to articulate, with enviable velocity, what it was I would be writing. Fahad’s politics made him weary of neo-colonial foreign researchers whose work meant nothing to Bangladesh; he declared that, if he were a woman, he would never agree to talk to me. While attending a friend’s lunch party, I met an elegantly turned-out woman who wondered why I had come all the way to Bangladesh for my research – didn’t women in Australia have stories of their own? My method of informal ethnographic interview sounded marvellous to Gourab, though he felt the need to point out that I clearly didn’t know Bangladesh well enough to attempt to write about it; trying to learn was fruitless. While talking to Sayeeda, a prominent cog in a Bangladeshi non-government organisation (NGO), I couldn’t help but reveal my feeling of displacement in Dhaka. ‘All women are exiles,’ she replied softly. This statement impressed me as a brilliant stroke of sympathy ‘til I got to know Sayeeda better and found that she often tested aloud lines for the novel she was writing in her spare time. Even Runia, when I first met her, seemed already to know the direction my work would take. While I admired her insight, I remained unconvinced by her redefinition of ethnographic portraiture as ‘case studies’. It was not until mid-February that we really began to talk. I arrived at the appointed time to learn more.

Runia began, ‘Last time, I told you, you already know, heh, that I’m a woman-loving woman. I told you, no?’ In Bangla, the word for homosexual is shomokami, which in stark definition means ‘same sex’. Hating the way the word narrows down relationships that are emotional, psychological and spiritual as well as sexual, Runia explained she prefers shomopremi, or ‘same love.’ Excluding men from her reasoning because of their more dominant standing in Bangladesh, Runia said the denial of shomopremi was another violation of women, together with forcing them to marry before they know they want to, let alone whom they want to love. Runia cited that sixty per cent of girls in Bangladesh are married before the legal age of eighteen: ‘Just imagine!’

It was not a surprise when Runia explained that in Bangladesh, same-sex loving is shrouded in ‘total silence and invisibility,’ seen by society, religion and culture as ‘abnormal and bad’. Swaprova, the woman-loving women’s support group Runia established, does not have a large public profile and is not yet concerned with political activism: its name, derived from the Bangla for ‘self’ and ‘light’, refers to the individual reflecting her existing brightness. Through personal contact and communication, Runia was able to gather one, then more, then about fifteen members of the group. Every month, behind Runia’s front door, Swaprova members share their stories and counsel one another. Or rather, Runia spends time counselling the younger members who still need to graduate, find a job and some kind of economic independence before even starting to think about living openly as woman-loving women. What Runia would have wanted for her younger self may motivate her, although she did not implicitly say so – and on this point I didn’t insist.

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Fresh from university with a Masters in Social Welfare, Runia was first employed at a local NGO. Later she was offered a first class gazette officer post in a government job, a position sought after in Bangladesh not for the prestige but for the fringe benefits – pensions and so on that do not exist in any other industry. Despite the series of exams to sit and the bad rural postings that follow, everyone in Bangladesh, so a friend told me, wants a government job. During her government service Runia won a scholarship to study a second Masters in the Netherlands, focusing on women and sustainable development. After returning to Bangladesh, Runia had the choice of going back to her government job or accepting a managerial position with the UN. Working in a government job narrows Bangladesh’s already small community – Runia described her former office as a place ‘where people especially in social matters have unnecessary interest, unnecessary interference, unnecessary talking behind, heh, and I felt that I don’t like that, heh, so that’s why I thought it’s better not to go back.’

For all her enjoyment of and her gratitude to the UN for giving her insight into her country, Runia realised, after her long career, that she was not in a true sense really enjoying the work: ‘It’s a good job, good salary, posh environment, so altogether everything is fine, there is no complaint but I felt in my heart that this is not really what I really want.’ In the end, Runia decided no other job would give her more opportunity or satisfaction than the UN. ‘So altogether after working for thirty years...I have taken voluntary early retirement,’ she told me.

Withdrawing from her professional persona is the first thing Runia is seeking to do in her retirement: ‘I want to give time to myself, and want to do little things that I value.’ Hearing this, I became suffused with doubt about how much precious time she would wish to give to my ‘case study’. At the same time, I remembered her saying brusquely (she always does seem brusque when she isn’t laughing): ‘I’m comfortable because I trust you and you want to know me and I want to...yeah, I want to contribute as much as I can. I’m comfortable to share with you, that’s it.’ I wondered how much of a performance I was getting from Runia; how much of her self-reflected light was concealed behind her self-composure.

During our second talk I noticed what a still person Runia was. She never fidgeted, whereas I was always trying to manoeuvre my legs into a better position, evidently looking so uncomfortable that Runia once interrupted herself to ask if I needed another pillow. She was perfectly as ease lying against the sofa with her back to the window, leaning on a cushion she’d moved onto the floor, with her arms above her head. During our second talk she laughed more and advised me on my growing relationship with Hossain, a local filmmaker: I could break if off, no problem, if I was not sure.

There is not much to be sure of in the world, except that it is unjust – even for those who put their faith in work and God (by various names). Runia is a religious person whose thoughts and everyday acts are performed according to her own way, not guided by institutional faith. Runia veered off the path set down for a Bangladeshi Muslim woman – or girl, she amended, correcting my assumption that her rebellion occurred later in life. When she was about twelve years old Runia learned to read the Qur’an in Arabic because her parents willed it. Now, years later, she can’t remember a single word and is dumbfounded by this lapse: ‘How come? Once you learn

something, once you learn a language, reading a language, then you can forget that?’ The strange machine of memory can block from us things we never thought we’d lose and things we wanted to remember. What Runia does recall is that when she was made to pray in the institutional way, she realised what she was intoning did not come from her heart. ‘Rather,’ she reflected, ‘I liked lying down and closing my eyes and then saying something to God that I believed in, heh, that God give me wisdom to know your way and give me strength to go accordingly, this kind of thing, heh, I enjoy, so I take that as my prayer...So I prayed for some times in their way but not in my own way.’

Runia’s family has had greater influence on her than any out-of-touch mullah, but even her parents and eldest sister have not convinced Runia to pray five times a day, to fast, and travel to Mecca for hajj. ‘I feel hurt, I feel bad that I cannot satisfy them,’ Runia confided, ‘and I also question, heh, that why they have to ask me for those things, when they should not.’ She laughed and wondered if they thought it was their duty to guide her, and whether it was her duty not to follow.

‘Last week,’ I began, ‘you mentioned you’d been married at an early age...?’

‘I was fourteen and a half...’

‘And your parents arranged it for you?’

‘Yes, that was arranged but that was not forced I would say.’

As a teenager, Runia had a strong interest in study but was not allowed to attend high school. She began to study by herself at home and was permitted to go to school once a year to take her final exam. Although she passed Class 6 and 7, when she was fourteen and a half and studying Class 8, it became difficult for Runia to study by herself, particularly English and mathematics, without help.

At the same time a proposal came to Runia’s father from a nearby family, declaring an interest in his girl for their boy. The proposal was discussed with Runia and her family and, in the end, Runia’s father made an agreement with the boy’s parents: the marriage could proceed if the boy’s family arranged for Runia to continue her studies and obtain her secondary school certificate.

‘In general,’ Runia told me, ‘getting married at that age was not anything new; it was normal and usual. And my other sisters also married at that age, heh. So yes I saw that girls my age, they got married, they live with men. Ah, but I did not know exactly the physical relationship, I mean, what is that and how it happens and how you feel.’

‘So no one really explained that deeply, intimately to you,’ I said.

‘This is also normal that it was not explained to me. This is a subject that is hidden and something that you should feel shy to discuss...socially, culturally it is a shame, like this.’

Six months after her marriage, Runia left her village for the first time and went to live in the district where her husband was working. She then started an entirely different life at her husband’s house and at high school. The campus was only for girls, with plenty of trees and enough space to run around at leisure. The enjoyment she felt at school contrasted against the private life that Runia shared with ‘that man’. Her husband was at least ten years older than Runia and although he was not a bad type – not abusive, that is – Runia explained that ‘he expected, heh, what a man expects from his wife, you know? That I would have sex with him, do all the housework and listen nicely to whatever he said. A typical Bangladeshi man.’

There was no question of life getting better but for a while it was the same, divided between home and study. All the while Runia struggled with being a wife, but gave most of her attention to passing her high school exam – ‘not more than that.’ Yet after this dream was realised, Runia felt the desire to try for admission to college. ‘No way!’ protested her husband. ‘I kept my word, given at our marriage. No way, I can let you study at college.’ Runia had a little money of her own, a wedding present from her elder sister, and used it to pay for her college admission. Even when her husband discovered what she had done, she ignored his disapproval and continued her studies.

At college, Runia met new people from a new place, including two students from the Catholic mission. She visited their church and was impressed with how nice everything was. Most of all, she was impressed by the lifestyle of her new friends, who were unmarried and devoted their lives to the welfare of other people. ‘I felt that oh, my God, so that is really real life and that is great life’ and made up her mind about something. ‘I told my so-called husband that hey, I don’t want to live with you. I want to divorce you and I want to be a Christian, I want to be a nun and I want to live that life.’ In the beginning her husband took it as a joke but then realised from her eyes and face that Runia was serious – or mad. He sent a hasty telegram to his father-in-law to come sharp. Runia’s father arrived, conferred with her husband and told Runia that her mother was ill and he had come to take her home.

As she had suspected, Runia’s family tried to persuade her that her place was with her husband and any other way was crazy. ‘I was fed up after a month,’ she recalled. One night her father told Runia that she had to decide what she wanted to do. She repeated her earlier words: I want to be a Sister and live in the mission. Since his words had had no effect, Runia’s father began to beat her; this made her determined to run away. After two or three days, Runia travelled to the mission and told the two Sisters that she had run away from home. Their panicked response, Runia remembered, was to tell her that she must go back – parents are next to God, and it was not God’s way to run away.

Blindly, Runia hailed a rickshaw and, without much thought, directed the rickshaw puller towards the launch terminal, knowing that from there many steamboats go to different places in the country. ‘I only knew that but I did not know where to go or how to live my life,’ she said. They were nearing the terminal when another rickshaw puller called out from behind, saying that he had been sent from the mission to tell Runia to go back.

I guessed the missionaries had been struck by sudden shame at refusing Runia asylum.

‘Could be,’ she mused. ‘Or they were a little scared that if something bad happened, if I committed suicide or something and left a note behind that I went to the mission and I was refused shelter, they would be in trouble.’

To avoid blame, the four missionaries – Father, Mother and two sisters – took Runia to the police station and asked permission to keep her at the mission until her family fetched her; the police gave it lazily. When Runia’s family did come to reclaim their girl, a long discussion ensued at the mission, but apart from agreeing to continue the next morning, nothing was resolved. That night, the missionaries asked her, ‘You love us don’t you? Do you want to put us, the whole mission in trouble, in danger?’ They advised her to go back to her family.

For the whole night Runia could not sleep for thinking what to do, what to do

and how to save herself, how to save the mission and what to do. She knew that under any situation her family would not agree to her life as a Christian, so she had to change the conditions into something they would fulfil. The next day, Runia announced that she would only leave the mission if her family arranged a divorce from her husband and promised to support her study. If they did not keep their word, she warned, ‘You know by this time what I can do and I will do again even worse, I will make things harder for you. I meant that and they recognised that that yes, this girl can do that, heh, because she’s brave or she’s crazy or I don’t know what.’

Runia laughed, even at the scandal of ‘putting down in the grave’ the reputation and good name of her family. Her dishonour, particularly to her father, was an ‘extreme, extreme thing.’

‘Don’t you love how brave and crazy are mixed?’ I asked.
‘I will say that it depends on how you define craziness, heh. I was crazy to continue my study but I was not out of my head.’

Runia sensed that her family held the missionaries responsible for her disobedience and that the mission, in return, desperately wanted a peaceful solution. When Runia’s family agreed to her conditions, the missionaries were happily relieved; she was simply happy to have won the fight, despite the sharam she had brought upon others. To deflect the shame of her running away, Runia’s parents had told the neighbours that their son-in-law had come in the night to take their daughter back to his village. Yet after three days, the local police came to her parent’s house to announce that she was at the mission. A visit from the police was a big event in any village and a crowd gathered around to hear the news. Gossips invented their own story to spread, one that cast Runia as a romantic heroine who had fallen in love with a Christian man and run away with him to live in the mission.

I laughed as she told me. ‘Oh right, so that’s more scandal.’
Smiling, Runia replied, ‘So that’s two scandals together.’
Her father and mother did not speak to her after they took her home, but Runia walked and swam and climbed the trees, not caring whether they spoke or not. With a laugh, she recalled that her parents instructed her brother-in-law to ‘do whatever you want, don’t ask us anything, just let her go to hell.’ After the divorce was final, Runia went to live with her sister and brother-in-law in Dhaka, which could be described as a different kind of hell. Admitted into a new college in Dhaka, Runia recommenced her studies and again, started a new life.

Although they never told her to remarry, Runia always knew that her parents wanted to see her settled, safe and secure in their own terms – that is, married with children – before they died. Runia’s second marriage was neither a love match nor a family arrangement, nor was she carried away by anything other than platonic emotion. The same cannot be said for her husband-to-be, a colleague from her days of government service, who had pursued Runia for three years, sending love letter after love letter, before she succumbed to his proposal. ‘Heh, I did not give a deep thought about what is love exactly in life,’ Runia admitted. With a laugh she added, ‘I didn’t know that it would not work out.’

Runia was prepared to sacrifice her ‘inner romanticism’ and emotional attachment to women for a good kind of man. Yet she soon found she could not like

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her new husband as a person; did not like his attitude or way of doing things; found him to be a very traditional, domineering man. Although Runia’s husband accompanied her to Holland while she studied her second Masters, their partnership was shaky and he soon declared his intention to leave. Runia requested that he return to Bangladesh until she finished her degree, after which she would follow and work out how to repair their marriage. But her husband would not wait and Runia, forced to decide there and then, announced it would be better to live apart. During the ten years that followed, she had no contact with her husband. ‘I didn’t bother to divorce him because the official piece of paper did not mean anything to me. Mentally, heh, I felt that it’s over,’ she told me. Eventually, on the practical advice of a friend, Runia did pursue the piece of paper and was officially divorced for the second time.

Since we are all reacting against something, I asked Runia if being married helped her isolate what she didn’t want. She replied that after the second marriage, getting into a relationship with a man was something she knew she would never want again. And having children? I wondered. Runia admitted surprise at never having conceived a child during her first marriage, particularly as she did not know how to prevent pregnancy. If she had fallen pregnant, her life would have been entirely different: she would have needed to stay with the father and would never have become independent. Marriage sharpened Runia’s vision, including her need for an education. ‘All these things happened, so in that way it has a link to marriage,’ she told me. ‘Otherwise marriage as such, it has not had much influence on my life.’

By the time our talk was over and it was evening, Runia was preoccupied as she walked me to the door. I hesitated over an impulse to hug her, uncertain how far over her boundary this would be. I thought of the abrupt dissolution of her second marriage and felt something for her husband – not pity, but a small realisation that his position would not have been uncomplicated. As the lift descended I regretted my decision not to hug Runia. All the formality, it seemed, was coming from me.

One afternoon, Runia and I were sitting on her balcony when rain began to drop into our tea cups. The storm that followed was a loud reminder that barsa would soon bring monsoon to break the enduring heat of spring. We sat for a while to catch the coolness then moved under the doorway.

The number of good women in Bangladesh, mused Runia, seems to outweigh the number of good men. It can happen that women find their match, she told me, but mainly when they meet men outside their country and the expectations of their culture. If a woman doesn’t meet the right man, her situation is rarely as simple as accepting with a shrug the single life, a frightening fate in a country where family almost amounts to a religion. ‘Women who are progressive, educated, smart or feminist and remain in Bangladesh bear the pain, heh.’ For the sake of the children, for the sake of duty and the responsibility, to keep clan reputations intact and above reproach, a woman must, said Runia, ‘adjust.’ She went on: ‘I personally think that life is simply an adjustment, altogether. We adjust with our family, we adjust with that friend, we adjust with our colleagues, we adjust in any situation...But still, it’s always women first, heh. They are expected to adjust more; they are always expected to adjust first.’

Pursuing the idea of adjustment, I remarked how matter-of-factly Runia told me the stories of her struggles, as though she was reading out a report of a woman

‘Runia Reflected: Talk Amongst Outsiders in Bangladesh.’ Kathryn Hummel.
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with the same name and experiences, somehow disconnected from her own life. Runia admitted a change in her manner. Now she doesn’t cry, doesn’t need to escape to the washroom or be comforted by her friends when she discusses her past. At fifty-nine, through God’s help and her own strength, Runia ‘cannot just let myself flow in the water like that.’ Instead, Runia dams up her emotions for inner exploration, though it can be unbearable to feel an emotion like pain, pleasure or desire and to stop it deliberately. ‘It gives,’ continued Runia, ‘the impression that you are a robot’ – or at least a human who manages everything so impeccably you have no need of support or company. Not true. All it means is that Runia never appears to cry.

At that moment, a tear swelled from the outer corner of Runia’s right eye and then from her left. The pain of bearing pain and of not crying can make you cry – then laugh again, as Runia promptly did.

Being an independent woman is fine, but it is also desirable to find and live with a partner who matches you and with whom you can share your emotions. Several times now, Runia has mentioned how wonderful this is. My own attitude is not blasé but undirected: a partner will come when I’m ready to receive him/her, as long as I continue to push my life forward in a general way, just as the lists I used to make for myself in more focussed years were all fulfilled, sooner or later. ‘Maybe you have not come to that stage yet,’ Runia responded. Her independence has been the biggest thing, but even though she has a house and money she does not have a human being to love. ‘So I think that yes, that is unfulfilled part,’ she said. ‘I feel that I have everything, but that part is missing.’

Runia had been living with a partner for one year before they discovered in what real sense they were different. ‘It’s unfortunate,’ said Runia, veering away from the experience in order to talk in general terms. ‘The longing for other human beings to care and feel cared for is deep.’ The start of the azan caught the end of her words and boomed through the window like an unsubtle sign from God.

I remember well enough the hasty discarding of my virginity and, I suppose, the simultaneous branding of myself as heterosexual in the act. Runia’s experience was different: she identified in her early life as a woman-loving woman but she could never truly name it. Her first marriage muddled her sexual instincts with duty, yet still Runia knew she felt emotionally closer to women. She recalled a girlhood crush on an older neighbour, which she expressed by gathering fruit to present to the woman, who no doubt thought Runia was a sweet child. Runia did not connect this idolisation to a romantic attraction to women until her final year of college.

Runia’s relationship with her college girlfriend came to a sudden end when the girlfriend discovered she was more partial to her college tutor, married him and left the country. For this sudden twist there was no explanation, apart from the worn out excuse of love. Runia chuckled as she told me how she could not figure out what had happened, particularly as the girls’ plan to live together after college was so serious they had started to collect objects for their future home. For two years the items were chosen and stored carefully in a trunk that Runia kept in the room of her dormitory, away from her girlfriend’s nosy mother.

For six or seven years after college, throughout university, from one place to another, Runia kept the trunk with her. She simply did not know what to do with it. Years later, she mentioned it to her ex-girlfriend. Now a married lady and a visitor to Bangladesh, the woman wondered at the absurdity of the collection remaining.

unused, with Runia. Without a word to anyone about the real weight of the trunk, Runia donated it to her student niece. She told me this was the end, but the writer in me disagreed – even with its contents dispersed, the trunk is a perfect metaphor for a loaded memory.

As her recollections latched together, Runia remembered that, during a later visit to Bangladesh, her ex-girlfriend announced she would arrange her old friend’s marriage. ‘Crazy,’ Runia said. ‘She knew I loved women but had become very religious over the years and thought women loving women was a sin.’ Runia challenged the idea of marriage and a man as antidotes to her transgressions; she challenged her friend. What were you when we had our relationship? Did you make a mistake or are you a sinner? The lady remained silent, safe in her marriage, her children and her morality. In conversation with me, Runia also fell silent before bursting out: ‘Imagine, just imagine! These people I mean, I mean I find people in this world crazy. Or maybe I am crazy but I don’t think I’m crazy, I think people are crazy.’

Loving women has not changed Runia’s regard for family, though she has been wary of revealing this part of her identity to her relations. She does not doubt their love, but knows they are unfamiliar with woman-loving women. In Bangladesh, where gender divisions are everywhere, even on public buses, women can sleep with women and men can sleep with men free from the implication of sex. It is actually quite easy for same-sex couples to live together without suspicion, though awareness of homosexuality in Bangladesh is growing – as an example of a sinful Western attitude, rather than an acceptable identity. This stigma, explained Runia, is slowly disintegrating the safe ignorance surrounding same-sex loving people and now the difficulties are starting; their lives are becoming obscure. Friendship between two women is acknowledged socially and culturally. Feeling affection for another woman, even sharing a bed with her, is acceptable, but anything more – sex and love and commitment – would be seen as a disaster.

Runia is certain her neighbours notice the arrival of Swaprova members with their cropped hair, trousers and shirts – not necessarily indicators of homosexuality but unusual in Bangladesh, where most women wear shalwar kameez and have flowing locks. The people who live in Runia’s building are educated and would not be unaware of same-sex relationships, yet no one has ever opposed Runia or made her life uncomfortable. ‘It is safe, this silence,’ Runia stated, though she also admitted the situation would have been different if her education, career and status were not as elevated, or if she did not own the apartment she lives in. As one who knows, Runia concluded how important it is to have power as a woman.

Knowing your identity is just as important and suddenly Runia noted I was not very clear about mine. Specifically, was I more comfortable with men or women in relationships?

So far it has been men, I told her, though relationships have always been a problem for me. This seemed to work well enough in Bangladesh, where, most of my lovers shared my desire not to engage in a lasting arrangement.

‘But the caring and sharing, the understanding,’ said Runia, ‘is what lasts the longest. That is nicer. What you’re doing now is difficult and sort of tiring, no? Having one after another and not getting satisfied.’

I explained that the question of a real relationship never surfaced and crossing
the extremes of culture never came up; that either dislike or incompatibility, or both in equal amounts, dulled every new passion. No desire ever lasted long.

‘Be careful, be careful,’ warned Runia, ‘otherwise you have to take the pain at last.’

My final taxi ride to Runia’s house left an imprint on my mind. My driver moved toward the cantonment, an area foreigners are barred from entering without a permit. When I protested that the guards would never let me through, the driver replied that, as a woman, I would not matter. He was right. The route revealed new sides of Dhaka: an Ayurvedic hospital, a house with walls covered in the draping fronds of pot plants, a district full of men and women tearing cotton down into strips for the mattress-makers of Nilkhet. I locked my eyes on the changing views, fearing that any detail I laid aside would prove significant later. Even then I realised the impossibility of recording everything I saw, heard and understood – or everything I didn’t – when I couldn’t even attempt a strict record of my own life.

Since our first meeting, Runia had shown me several different dimensions of her character. Some she described as ‘forming’ herself, others were transferred to her. Runia told me she began being, not just living, because of her parents, who were ‘beautiful people by their hearts’. When Runia was young she thought people could only learn through study and travel, but her father had naturally deep capacities for humanity, justice, kindness and beauty. Though it was not his profession, he served as a *shalish* in his local community and was respected in this role as arbitrator even beyond his district. Reflecting his love of nature, his garden at the front of Runia’s childhood home was so beautiful that the villagers referred to the house as *Foolwala bari*, the place of flowers; Hindu people were drawn to it during times of worship.

Runia’s description of her mother began with a sigh. She was, Runia said, a kind and good-hearted person but traditional in her values and duties as a woman. She served her family and submitted to her husband and other men, though always encouraged her husband to support their daughter’s mania for education. This sympathy faltered when Runia ran away from her first marriage, but did not altogether disperse. Although she lived with her sister in Dhaka following her first divorce, Runia often visited her parents in their village home, where, despite the slow process of healing, they began once more to see their daughter as part of themselves, with qualities they possessed.

So many young people I know seek the opportunity to leave Bangladesh in the name of their own advancement. My friend Sharma is one who wants to escape – not, as she says, for money and power in a different country, but because she wants a life where she can live more freely as a woman. Some people regard the social and political problems of the country, and the system that perpetuates them, as too deeply entrenched to ever change. *Kichu korar nai* is a well-used saying in Bangladesh, a voiced throwing up of the hands in the face of the seemingly insurmountable, about which there is Nothing To Do. Runia has little sympathy for those who run away from Bangladesh, who call their own country disgusting and unliveable. She declared this from the position of one who has studied abroad and returned with the intention of making her country better: ‘There are many, many odd things, but at the same time heh, if you run away, who will do this, who will clean the dirt? At least we should try, no?’

After I departed Bangladesh, only to return a year later, I discovered that what I had written about Runia came nowhere near reflecting what I had learned. I considered Gourab’s doubtful words at the commencement of my research and questioned whether my understanding was indeed deep enough. Everything I read – all those good and useful books guarding against confusion – didn’t help. Because I had heard it all before, I ceased to read and accepted how few conclusions can be drawn around countries or people.

My thoughts remain with the process of listening – and my words in attendance to Runia’s own, strong voice. At the time of our final interview, I was reluctant to stop talking and start thinking about writing. Hoping to have my dawdling vindicated, I asked Runia how well she thought people ever know each other. Human beings are too mysterious to know deeply, she responded, and any assumption to the contrary can only lead to hurt, though it is a type of pain that shakes our inner belief in a good way. ‘You know,’ she went on, ‘life is divided into two parts. One that is real and happening and another that is your feeling inside and, I mean, something imaginary. And you feel, you think, that would have been very enjoyable but if really, exactly, if that happens to your life, you will not like it.’ It is in these particular words I now see a symbiotic flicker in the reflections of Runia and myself, at once inside and outside Bangladesh. From our different positions, it seems that both of us are seeking the same in people and countries – from our places outside, we are seeking the reflection of our longings.
Keep at it! Keep at it! Smoko in ten! Keep at it! The young supervisor with the neat white shirt and GPO tie walked slowly down the left side of the row of workers seated at the Face-Up Table. Lotsa blokes want the work, he called, Keep at it! Speed! Accuracy! He turned and sauntered down the right hand side. The vast Christmas mail came in cascades from the input shaft – letters, cards, manila envelopes, all shapes and sizes pouring like an avalanche in slow motion. I sat transfixed. Would I survive this tsunami?

The Face Up table at Adelaide GPO was about eight feet wide and maybe forty or fifty feet long. The Christmas mail moved at glacial speed on top of a conveyor belt. Our job was simple but mind numbing. We had to select mail from the pile and build three piles of envelopes – small, medium, and large, directly in front of us, pulling out the letters from the endless heap, setting them upright with the stamp on the top right hand side. Sounds easy but it isn’t. The young supervisor walked up and down behind the rows of workers seated at the table, exhorting us, threatening us, cajoling, menacing, repeating that Her Majesty’s Mail required both speed and efficiency. He’d call out the time for the next smoko when we could get off the table and walk about and relax and smoke for ten minutes, refocus eyes that were glazing and a mind that was frozen solid. We’d stand up away from the chairs, shake our heads like unleashed dogs or horses, stretch like cats, light up a Capstan, and sip at a Woodroffe’s lemonade bottle.

What kept the three of us at this brain-deadening work was the dream of a graduation trip to Surfers Paradise in Queensland in January. Keg had worked it all out. Or a part of it. Third-class rail fare sitting up only on the train – Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Surfers – for about twenty eight quid. Working nights 8pm-4am at the Adelaide GPO for four weeks before Christmas at twenty quid a week would do it no worries. Eighty quid was lots. We could still go to uni during the day. Five hours sleep was plenty. Besides we only had morning lectures two days a week. Catch up on sleep on the train, suggested Keg. So we were all three in like Flynn no sweat.

Keg had an older uncle Curly Barnet who was a personnel manager at the GPO and Keg, also known as Bernard to his family, got all three of us interviews. As per Aussie ironic nicknaming, Curly was as bald as an emu egg – his domed head shone brilliant white as he looked us over. We filled out the application forms and then stood there in his office as he glowered at us from over his glasses, flipping through our applications.

Well you don’t look like criminals, he muttered, but you have bugger-all work records. God knows what will happen to Her Majesty’s Mail if I let you lot at it. He sighed. We’re short of hands so we’ll give you a tryout. Give your particulars to my secretary. Punch in before eight pm on November 27. And you, Bernard, are in my sights if this mob turns bad. Give your mum my love.

We started our duties at the Face Up Table but before that we had an Orientation Session. Probably about thirty of us new recruits standing around on the main floor near the Face Up table – mainly older blokes. Not a woman anywhere. And us three in a group. At the Face Up Table, about a dozen or so old fellows picked

‘The Face Up Table.’ Kevin Roberts.
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away slowly at the pile of mail moving at caterpillar speed past them. Some looked a bit worse for wear. Like alkies from the parklands with grey blue stubbled faces and shaky hands. The clatter of machines and conveyor belts overhead and all about was pretty loud. The place was in full Christmas swing. An abundance of white-shirted GPO supervisor blokes wandered about doing something or other – though most of the older ones just seemed to float here and there, chatting to the workers. But our supervisor was young and enthusiastic. He had to yell over the noise but he went on about efficiency and flow rates and production cost cuts. I sort of recognised him from uni – but two years ahead of us – Business faculty – played footy. But I didn’t let on. That’d be too forward, too familiar, too brown-nosing.

You new blokes follow me, he yelled.

He strode off and we followed like a mob of straggling sheep. I noticed a couple of older blokes in our group simply peel off and disappear. The next stop was the entrance landing downstairs. Red GPO vans pulling in. Incoming bags of mail tossed on to conveyor belts taking all the letters upstairs. Then the Face Up Table. The same blokes sat there picking even more slowly at the mail, which was gathering in a huge heap at the end. The old stagers seemed totally unperturbed by the growing heap, some of it now spilling on to the floor. They picked away at the heap with shaky hands like half-blind chickens. Had to feel sorry for them.

This, the young super pointed to the table, is a major flow rate problem. You, he waved at us, have all been hired to improve the production level here. Ok. Follow me.

We walked to Prime Sorting, then Fine Sorting. These Sorter blokes sat in front of twenty or more pigeon holes and flipped letters into the appropriate hole. They looked very confident as they held a handful of mail and dispatched it. One or two wore those shade caps. Our super stopped and cried out over the noise — this too is a major flow rate efficiency problem. But not really your concern.

One Sorter bloke gave our super the finger behind his back. We went on to Parcels. Registered. We were not allowed past the glass partitions containing those last two.

Security of HM’s mail is a very high priority in the GPO, our super announced.

We looked in through glass panes at a group of men tossing parcels to each other and dumping them in huge wheeled bins. They dropped a few, but didn’t seem too worried about it, though at each failed catch our super winced. Then we went on to Final Sorting. This looked like Re-sorting as well, given the big number of blokes tossing mail into holes. Then the Delivery Landing. More GPO vans and trucks arrived to take the mail out for delivery. It all seemed to be well planned and efficient. Funny though that as we walked about the GPO, in the dark edges and sides of the big rooms and halls, figures seemed to dart away or disappear as soon as we went by.

Our last stop was the Mail Bag room, heavily secured with padlock and deadbolts. Our super stopped before the door and harangued us about HM mail’s integrity, outlining the heavy criminal penalties for stealing HM’s stamps, the sacred nature of mail bags and the heinous crime of reading private letters. While he was on this criminal topic he went on about not using more than ten minutes in the lavatory once a shift and offered dire warnings about penalties for bludgers and slackers and clock watchers.

‘The Face Up Table.’ Kevin Roberts.
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What about reading postcards? some old bloke asked. 
You can’t stop that. But confidentiality is key, our super cried. We are the keepers of the integrity of HM’s mail. Let us always remember that.

He unlocked the big doors to the Mail Bag Room and turned on the lights. It was a huge room. A massive pile of grey canvas mailbags filled the far end. Our super ran up the mountain of mailbags. Just as he was about to speak the mountain erupted. Like a rabbit warren when the ferrets are put into the holes; here, there, everywhere, men disgorged themselves from the pile. A head first, then an arm there and finally a body leaped out from its hidden cave deep in the mail bag mountain. They all ran for the open door. Too quick to count them or recognise any one of them. I reckoned damn near a dozen. Our super was stunned.

Stop! he cried. Stand still there! But they were all long gone. I thought our super was about to cry. Silence. Muffled giggles from our group. Had to hand it to those blokes. Sleeping off a night shift in peace and quiet under mailbags beats working, though how the hell they managed it, locked doors and all, I couldn’t fathom. Our super recovered.

That is the end of orientation, he announced, ignoring what we’d just seen. Please report to the Face Up table in ten minutes.

After a couple of nights at the Face Up Table I felt my mind was slowing. The mail came in endlessly, a huge pile moving ever so slowly past us as we sat and sorted – stamp in top right hand corner – three sizes. But the real trouble was the decision about size – small, medium, large. After a few hours I would hold a letter up and be unable to decide for the life of me, whether it was small, medium, or large, or on which of the three piles in front of me it should go. I would freeze up for a few seconds and then drop back into the deadening routine. What was soul destroying was the fact that like Sisyphus rolling his rock up hill, we never made any headway on the never-ending avalanche of mail, which came at us like a wave all night and was still coming when we knocked off at four am and left the Table for the early shift. Also depressing was that the moment when we did build three respectable piles of envelopes roughly in three sizes, a worker would walk by and take them off to Primary Sorting. That job was called Pick Up. Looked real easy by comparison with Face Up. I was just about at my wits’ end at the Face Up Table when I got a break. I grinned at my mates who shot envious glances my way. I leaped up. For three nights I gathered mail from the right hand side of the table and took it to Primary Sorting. But it was not the cushy job it appeared. My mates accused me of sucking up to the super.

Bullshit, I said. All I did was keep up my side of the Table. I think he’s a poof, declared Keg. Don’t bend over.

No way, said Kitbag. I saw him at a party snogging away with Anne Lucas. We all digested this. Anne Lucas was a dark curly-haired, baby-faced, porcelain-skinned, green-eyed doll. From a rich family. She was taking Arts at uni. We all lusted after her, but she was private-school-only apply. We were all State High School proles.

The work dragged on. The young super grew visibly in our grudging esteem, though not in our affection. Turned out my promotion wasn’t all it was cracked up to
The blokes working at Primary Sorting certainly did not want any mail to sort at all. That seemed to be their basic aim. And they were wary of any possible extra work I handed down at their side. Their main concern was to avoid any work, to make sure they did not get any more letters than the next bloke to sort. So they watched like hawks the size and nature of the piles I brought from the Face Up Table. They were rude and aggressive about the whole process. So I worked out a system. I told all of the Primary Sorters I’d bring them each a mail pile as big as their wanger. They thought that was funny and for a couple of hours joked freely about the various sizes and height of the mail I handed out, and taunted each other, especially when I dropped a two inch pile of all small size mail in front of the biggest whinger, a fat bloke called George. Actually he took it pretty well and kept his gob shut after that.

But after a couple of hours we dropped into a dull routine and a bored silence rose. They continued their monotonous work, though I could tell that after a couple of hours they were just tossing letters willy-nilly. It couldn’t have been too tough to distinguish between Australian states and the other big continents like Asia, or Europe and so on but very quickly I realised that most of these blokes couldn’t or wouldn’t bother to distinguish Tuvalu from Timbuctoo and simply tossed any mildly challenging mail into Foreign, thus passing the buck nicely on to the next lot of sorters. As long as I was fair and open with handing out the mail the Primary Sorters were happy, though every now and then I’d throw in a big or small pile of letters just for a giggle.

I got promoted yet again a few nights later. The young supervisor, hearing laughter from the Primary blokes, cruised over to see what this unusual noise was. Actually I’d dumped a very large pile of extra-large mail on George as a joke to break up the monotony.

What’s so funny? he asked.
Silence. He looked at me and at the sorters who put their heads down and worked stolidly away.
Ok, he said. I have an extra job for you. Come with me.
The Face Up Table loomed in my mind as punishment, but instead we walked a few yards away, and he turned to me.
If you are interested in management, he said, Don’t get too familiar with the workers.
I am a worker, I said.
You could move up. I’ve watched you, he added. You’ve dealt well with distribution here.
I’m just a temp, I said.
He looked at me for a long second. Ok. Here’s your extra work. Up there. See those conveyor belt crossovers? Where the two meet?
I followed his finger. Letters were piling up, bending, crumpling, and crushing at the junction. A small pile of mail lay on the floor. More fluttered down as we watched. Yeah. I see the problem, I said.
Maintenance was supposed to fix this yesterday, but they haven’t. So we improvise. Take this broom handle and every couple of minutes give it a good prod and poke to clear the junction. Place the spillage in the in-bin for re-sorting.
Two jobs? I said. I keep on handing out the mail as well?
He was silent for a second or three. Ok, he said, I’ll get you relief every hour.
And someone else on the sorters now and then. Ok?
Suits me, I said.

And so began my third promotion at the GPO, standing with a stick and poking at overhead conveyor belts when they got jammed up, and distributing piles of mail to the sorters. Every hour I got a good long break when some poor addle-eyed wreck from Face Up took over the poking for me. Maintenance never seemed to fix the problem. In fact some nights it was visibly worse. My job as mail deliverer continued. Actually I learned Primary Sorting on my sixth night just for something to do. It was not rocket science, though I picked up the info that Primary Sorter positions at the GPO were jealously guarded, and required an entry form, an exam, and an interview. But it was not too tough to pick up the rudiments of Primary mail sorting. Australian States were specific pigeon holes and all they had to do with the rest was shove it into pigeonholes labelled Asia, Europe, Africa, America, and about another six or so large continents. There were also a few common countries, like England or USA. The biggest pigeonholes and most used were either Foreign or Misc. They copped the lot every night. From what I saw the bulk of the sorted mail got tossed in there, either through ignorance, or laziness, boredom, or sheer caprice. Some blokes got so jacked off with the whole sorting business that when faced with Bhutan or even Burma/Myanmar they gave up the ghost, filed the whole pile of letters into Misc. or Foreign and sat back waiting for their next batch to arrive. A map of the world hung above them but it was clear that for the majority of primary sorters places like Maldives or Miquelon were far too specific for their expertise, and demanded far too much of the average Primary Sorter. The GPO hierarchy of rank and expertise became clearer to me after my fourth promotion. It was a big one and the green envy of my mates, two of whom seemed stuck on the misery of the Face Up table.

Strangely, Keg liked the Face Up Table. I just sit here, he said, and think of girls swishing by in bikinis and the surf curling in on golden sand and the bikinis ripping off in the surf and time just flies by.

My fourth promotion was to the position of mail-deliverer to Secondary Sorting. These blokes thought themselves a cut above the other workers, having passed two tests and an interview for their seat on the Secondary Sorter tables. They loved to scornfully call out the errors of previous sorts, though their corrections were not always much better.

What bloody idiot put Tuvalu in India? Got to be Europe!
What nitwit shoved Bhutan in the USA? Everyone knows it’s in Russia!
Ha Ha! Lithuania in Asia? Any clot knows it’s Middle East!

I thought I’d rectify a few of these errors by looking over the piles beforehand, particularly the Misc. which always overflowed. I fixed a lot of errors there, on the quiet, mainly the simple obvious ones. Again the young supervisor somehow picked up on what I was doing. He took me aside again.

The GPO doesn’t mind, he said, in fact they applaud what you’re doing. I thought it was a bit thick him talking for the GPO, but he went on. But the union’ll have your head if they catch you and we’ll have to fire you.

Well, the sack wasn’t an option for me, so I began to paddle along at the mediocre pace of the Secondary Sorter blokes. The nights began to drag. We all got
more and more tired. Sleeping from 4 am till 8 am began to take its toll. Kitbag got bitchy and Keg was always dozy. We began to look for ways to sneak off and sleep. Like everybody else we took an hour for our half-hour lunch breaks and half an hour snoozing on the toilet in the lav. At any given time a snorting cacophony of snoring men came from the row of toilets. We stretched out our ten-minute smokes every two hours and generally put the gear in low. But that wasn’t enough. Keg and Kitbag found a row of largely unused mail bins on wheels in a dark corner and whenever the young supervisor was away or on another shift, they jumped inside and curled up in blissful sleep. Amazingly they got away with this for three nights.

By bad luck, an old Supervisor, out of his normal route, probably lost or pissed or both, tripped in the dark on the bins. Both Keg and Kitbag’s heads shot up. But all he did was bellow at them, Face Up Table! Right now!

Kitbag and Keg ran out of the dark back to the table while the supervisor stood in the dark holding his aching shin. It was clear he hadn’t recognised them at all. I don’t think he had a clue that they were temps and simply punished them as if they were full time union malingerers by sending them to the Face Up Table of Horrors. I couldn’t try anything because the supervisors somehow seemed to know me, or maybe I was too chicken to take chances. Surprisingly they didn’t seem to recognise anybody else, even the permanent blokes, or maybe they didn’t want to. The full-time blokes knew the bosses didn’t have a clue who each individual worker was, and took advantage of two-hour lav breaks and even three-hour lunches. Some just seemed to disappear into dark corners for hours at a time.

Somehow HM mail got through. I pondered the mystery of the triple-locked Mail Bag Room rabbit warren but couldn’t work it out.

One of the Primary blokes put it to me this way at lunch. Listen, we’re all small potatoes in the stew and no one misses a couple of tiny spuds. Especially if your name is Mr B.A.Nonymous. Get it?

I found out no union bloke ever actually got fired. Usually they got told off and a strip torn off them which went like water off a duck’s back. In fact they laughed about it. Some got nasty Bad Report letters in their files. Some were suspended for a day or week, usually with pay. Sometimes they got demoted, some even back to the Face Up table. Turning up drunk at work got them docked one day without pay I was told. Some blokes took a day off a month that way, usually a Monday or Friday to get a long- weekend. They had to be careful not to turn up pissed too often or they got a rehab week with the GPO chaplain. That apparently was regarded as really bad news.

Despite all this HM mail got through. Even if the workers pinched loose stamps, a heinous crime which was supposed to bring the Federal Police in on the act, they were always given the benefit of doubt. Everyone it seemed nicked a few loose stamps but they stashed them in the cuffs of their trousers or rolled up shirt sleeves or in their shoe tops so it always looked like accidental flutter-ins.

The GPO work looked like a real soft touch for ten months of the year, except for Christmas, and even then they brought in lots of temps. Most of the permanent blokes adjusted readily to the sloth-like GPO pace and a good number of them were cunning malingerers and total bludgers. We were beginning to fit into this ethos ourselves, though I didn’t feel right about it.

My next and fifth promotion was in the last week before Christmas. Kitbag and Keg had finally got off the Face Up Horror and were handing out mail to Sorters.

‘The Face Up Table.’ Kevin Roberts.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014.
Despite our slack efforts and bludging ways we had all out shone the permanent blokes. A bunch of permanent union blokes, recusants and recidivists, were now chained like galley slaves to the Table. But, again led by the young Super, I was now promoted downstairs into the cool quiet air of the Outgoing Landing. This was a big move. The responsibility of the job was drilled into the gathered workers. This was usually a Senior GPO job. Security was the keyword. HM mail must be protected at all costs. I was now on the front line.

The landing itself was an elevated concrete curve, a road really, a landing for the red GPO trucks and vans to pull up and pick up their specific load of mail for delivery. Behind us a series of a dozen or more numbered metal chutes rose up into the sensitive bowels of the GPO building. Down these chutes at specific times would rumble HM’s sealed mailbags. I was given a two-wheel trolley and told that three chutes were my responsibility. G, H, and I. When one bag came rattling down the chute I was to put it on the trolley and wheel it to the exact corresponding spot on the landing where, about ten yards apart, G, H, and I were painted in large letters. G to G, H to H, I to I. I repeated the mantra to the young super who nodded his approval.

And one bag only at a time, he said firmly.

One bag at a time, I said.

But how do I know which van is the right one for the bag? I asked

You don’t. The driver does, he said flatly.

I kept quiet but I thought of the general state of GPO Union blokes’ efficiency and reckoned how easy it’d be for anyone in a red van or blue or white or any van to just pick up a bunch of mailbags and zoom off with the precious and sacred mail of HM. He seemed unperturbed by this possibility and walked off to the stairs leading upstairs.

We were fairly busy for the first couple of nights, though it was hard to tell how many blokes actually worked on the Landing. Every night it was a different number and blokes’d disappear here and there and re-appear at the knock-off whistle. We carried their mailbags for them. There was a lot of grumbling about the lazy bastards and a few set-tos now and then, but nothing serious because we all sneaked away when we could, and the kettle calling the pot black was pretty silly.

The red GPO vans arrived more or less on time and seemed to know which numbers they had to pick up. One driver was called the Cowboy. He wore his telegram pouch slung low like a six gun holster and had a Stetson on his seat ready to wear out on the road. He drove his van as if it was a coach and six horses calling out appropriate commands like ‘whee up’ as he came in and ‘geddy up’ as he took off. Another was called ‘Never’ because he was never on time. Another ‘Well I’ll’ because he kept saying ‘Well I’ll’. I thought he was called Walleye for a bit until I caught on. Another ‘Thallium’ because he was a slow working dope, another ‘Killer’ because he stuttered and glanced about with nervous darting eyes and crouched down in a paranoid stance ready to run. Another ‘Shadow’ because he was rumoured to be frightened of his own shadow. I reckoned anybody who stayed on at the GPO would end up with one of these juvenile nicknames, though none of the so-named drivers seemed upset when answering most cheerfully to their uncomplimentary nicknames. The last thing I wanted was a nickname born of GPO boredom and over-familiarity. The one I already had – Shorty – because I was a bit tall, did me fine.

Kitbag and Keg had another run-in with an old bald super. They were in the

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big mail bins in the dark corner sleeping after lunch when the bins started to move. When the long row of bins entered the glaring fluorescent lights of the main floor they woke up. They immediately leaped out of the bins, and with the old super roaring after them, ran and dodged their way past Primary Sorting to the Face Up Table. There they began to zealously build their piles of mail. The young super downstairs with us on the Landing missed the event. The old super who caught them couldn’t work out who was who anyway, and went off muttering. Relieved, the pair dropped their letter-sizing down to the slothful pace of the other drones seated next to them, and when no Super was around, went back to delivering letters to Primary. The letters were decreasing in volume anyway and the pile of mail on the table had fallen to a mere dribble.

The last couple of nights the Christmas mail dropped right off. For the first two hours when new blokes first arrived we were all pulled in to the Mailbag Room to feed strings through the necks of the bags and attach lead crimpers to the tops. Then we went back to normal jobs. Down on the Landing we filled in time between the rare arrival of a mailbag down the chutes, standing by our trolleys and pretending we were idling diesel trucks. Or singing carols. Or Abdul the Bul Bul. Or telling jokes. Anything to break the boredom. Someone’d pretend to have a flat tyre or a dead battery. We’d gather to consult. When the super was upstairs we had imagined drag races with our trolleys, up and down the landing.

The last night I had an unexpected visitor on the Landing – the young supervisor. There were no bags dropping down the mail chutes at all. Upstairs was apparently also very quiet. Most blokes’d found a sleeping spot and the supers were nowhere to be seen, though the rumour was they were at a big piss-up in the offices on the fourth floor. The young super had brought a small bottle of Drambuie.

Christmas drink? He asked me. The others wandered off a bit miffed. We sat dangling our legs over the landing, sipping on the Drambuie. Chris was his name. He was very reflective. I reckon he’d had a couple of drinks beforehand.

You don’t want a job here? he said. I could put a word in.


Can’t blame you, he said. I have to move on too. This job is going nowhere. We could be 100% better if we tried. But it’s a fluster-cluck. You’ve seen it. Slacking off, sleeping. Incompetence. No one cares. All of it just rolls along like a…slug…that’s it, like a slug. The time-wasting scams. Blokes sleeping in the mail bag room.

Yeah, I said. How the hell did they get in there past all the locks?

I reported that incident, Chris said. Wrote it up in detail. It got ignored. I found out those blokes probably slip one of the supers a quid or two and he locks them in for the whole shift. They never touch a letter but get paid anyhow. I couldn’t prove anything.

But aren’t the unions the problem?

No, said Chris very sadly. It’s not just the unions. We can negotiate efficiency and tighten all the details with them. A lot of the union blokes are embarrassed by the goings on. No, it’s just old tired management. Encrustation. Everything’s stuck in old spider webs. Management rust and decay and no one cares. It’s rotten. I hope it’s better elsewhere. Maybe a private corporation. Ok, so we got the mail out again this Christmas. The supervisors are all upstairs celebrating, he said, waving the bottle up
at the ceiling, but it was a really a disaster. A shambles. The three monkeys. See no bludgers hear no bludgers. Definitely never see a bludger. I’m moving on.

Chris got up, shook my hand, wished me Merry Christmas and walked off. Then he turned and said, Oh, by the way, Anne says hello - Anne Lucas.

He smiled and left. I was a bit thunder struck by the last message. But I started to wonder where I was going. Surfers Paradise, yes, bikinis and surf. But after that? After graduation? Somewhere better? Elsewhere? I sat on the Landing, thinking.

I knew Chris and I would never be friends but we had a connection of some kind I couldn’t quite fathom. It had to do with encrustation and a better elsewhere. Where I was going after uni blew into a vast blur – maybe into dark abyss. It was frightening. Maybe out there it was all a stuffed up fluster-cluck like Chris said, no matter what you did for a living. I didn’t want to think about it. I hoped, like Chris, things would also be better elsewhere, wherever that was.

At knock-off time I went upstairs to line up with Keg and Kitbag to collect my pay. The three of us waved our pay cheques about like flags and danced and whooped. We went down to the market pub which opened fruit and vegetable stalls at five am. At just after five in the Public Bar we downed four quick shots of rum and milk. After which I slept like an innocent without a single care for the GPO, HM or her endless mail rolling in like mindless surf or the three blind monkeys awaiting us all.

‘The Face Up Table.’ Kevin Roberts.
_Transnational Literature_ Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014.
On weekdays, lonely and bored, Smita would do what she could always deftly do — turn herself into a boy. An instant change she could easily effect before a mirror or bare wall or on the bed. An empty home was a perfect stage for any dramatic mid-afternoon gender-reversal. She would become a boy in a jiffy. A boy who was an absent sibling. And a trusted companion and confidante.

‘I am Deepu,’ Smita would announce to all the denizens populating her universe. And roam the house as a boy, firing invisible pistols in the air, producing guttural noise as a sound-track to the entire mayhem. She feared none during such moments of metamorphosis. Except her dad.

Dad was perpetually angry. Commanding hoarsely, ‘Smita do not do this. Do not do that. Sit here. Do not dance. Study hard.’ Always after her.

Never likes me whatever I do!

After returning from work, Dad hardly smiled or hugged or looked at her. Just sat in the den. Sometimes Smita ventured into his dangerous territory, on tip-toes, holding her breath but Dad never looked up, from gazing out of his barred window and drinking dark liquid in a glass. The content emitted a bad smell; it was called Dad’s evening juice by Ma. Once she insisted on drinking the tempting juice but was pushed outside by angry Dad, saying, ‘only men drink such a costly stuff’. After taking that mysterious water with lots of ice cubes, Dad would come out of his den, singing occasionally but mostly cursing. Fights erupted. Dad screamed; Ma also, after turning on the volume of the television to confuse the curious neighbours. Smita would go and hide in a cupboard, holding her old doll. These were regular scenes. Afterwards Ma served him a hot dinner. Smita was terrified of his eyes. Blood-red. She was scared of his round bulging eyes and tall, gaunt frame. A picture in a fairy-tale book, of a cruel king, looked exactly like Dad!

She avoided his eyes. They spewed fire-balls that scorched her whole being. Reduced her to nothing.

Ma was perpetually busy. She did not have time.

‘Look, Ma,’ Smita once exclaimed, trying to draw her out, on a long summer evening.

Ma ignored such friendly requests when tired after work and ready for the evening chores.

Ma ignored such friendly requests when tired after work and ready for the evening chores.

Smita had tiptoed to her side and shown her the picture. ‘Dad’s picture is in this book,’ she told a mother busy with pots and pans in that little space she called hell.

‘What is this book?’ demanded Ma.

‘Fairy tales.’

‘You are now a big nine-year-old girl. At your age, I assisted my ma in the kitchen. Such a big family! Twenty-two mouths to feed. You never do anything. Just sit and read fairy tales…BAD!’ Her voice grew loud, almost screaming.

The little kitchen, full of smoke, was a hot furnace. The smell of the fried spices, trapped inside, made Smita choke. Ma perspired badly. Preparing dinner —
her hands automatic; grinding, mixing and stir-frying at a speed that always left her only girl-child speechless. Bad!

Smita’s face fell.

‘Life is NOT fairy tale. UNDERSTOOD?’ Ma looked through her.

‘Leave me alone.’ The chastened child slipped away, ghost-like.

Deepu came as a helping friend. Smita would stand before the mirror and say to her, ‘Ma does not love me, Deepu. Nobody does. They wanted you, NOT ME.’

It was a fact drilled into her small head by paternal aunts and her coughing grandmother. ‘Your Pa was expecting Deepu only. But, look, we got you instead!’

How desperately, Smita wanted the change. She prayed to a little statue of Goddess Durga kept on a wall-mounted shelf in her room — their shrine. ‘Please, divine mother, turn me into the boy that everybody, including Ma, wanted. You are a goddess. You can do miracles. Please, Mother, change me into Deepu, my brother who could not come here. This will make my family HAPPY.’

Goddess Durga’s eyes smiled always at her pleading self. Then, one long afternoon, Smita converted herself into a boy by strapping a toy pistol to her waist and wearing a hat. It became a daily ritual; a diversion. She transformed into a he.

Sometimes, hurt and crying, Smita would say to Deepu, ‘Why do not they love little girls here?’ On holidays, afternoons, with her parents asleep, she would say softly to her brother, ‘Only you hear me out and never complain. Such a lovely brother! I know you love me. Others do not even talk to me.’

Or, she read comics or fairy tales. ‘The Crying Princess’ was her favorite fairy tale.

A king who never smiled at his daughter, imprisoned her in a golden cage the size of a castle, on an island guarded by dragons, and surrounded by choppy sea that listened only to the gruff commands of an ageing one-eyed regent. With her mother dead and a cruel stepmother hating her, the lonely princess cried copiously, her tears adding to the rising levels of the perilous sea. The king never wanted to see his dark-complexioned princess. Step-mother wanted her murdered but the gentle creature was saved by kind angels. The daughter loved her father, the king, so much that she would cry daily from morning until night. Then lulled by a kind sea breeze, she would fall asleep. One night, poison sent in a fruit salad put crying princess into a coma.

The good fairy, her god-mother, got so annoyed that she put a spell on the entire kingdom. ‘Freeze,’ said the angry fairy.

They all froze. Tended by the good fairy, crying princess was restored to good health. ‘Please do not punish them,’ she said. ‘Spare my father, mother and all his subjects, please.’

Touched by her innate goodness, the good fairy said, ‘When you stop crying and start smiling, the spell will be lifted.’

‘When will that be?’

‘A kind man will come by and claim you as his wife and give you happiness, and then it will happen,’ revealed the fairy and disappeared.

Years rolled by. Many men, enticed by popular accounts of her innocence and pure beauty, tried to reach her in her gilded prison but were devoured by the
hungry sea or fiery dragons on the prow, until one day a handsome commoner, assisted by kind angels, came down to claim her heart in the frozen kingdom.

As soon as love struck, the princess stopped crying and smiled. The moment she did that, the spell was lifted and normalcy returned. A repentant king put the step mother in the dungeon and gave away her share of the kingdom to the princess as a dowry. After becoming queen, she released her step mother and pardoned her. All lived happily after.

Smita loved the story very much but the eye of the king in the illustration frightened her. He always stared hard. And he would change into her Indian dad…Oh! So scary!

Every day, after her parents left the flat in suburban Mumbai, its sixth floor would change into a huge fort. The 550-sq-feet house — so tiny and crowded with furniture — locked, eerily silent, looked vast, unfamiliar, threatening, with dangers lurking within and without.

Do not ever open the door for any stranger. We will come and open it with our duplicate keys. In emergencies, call up Manju Aunty. She will come and help. Never open the door or respond to the bell, OK? There are wolves that prey on little girls in Indian cities. They kill them. The thirsty wolves.

The deserted apartment contained many surprises for the little girl. Every corner turned into a dark spiral staircase, every closet filled with wild creatures; the little balcony became a wide terrace, and few potted plants grew into full trees. She became a crying princess needing to be rescued by an adventurous hero.

At those trying moments, Smita would change into Deepu, firing pistols, charging at the guards, fighting the fiery dragons and sailing back across the hungry sea. Ready to swallow human beings. Deepu became the braveheart, the brother everybody missed in the family. Deepu would do what she could never do as a girl.

‘I am Deepu now. I will do what Smita cannot. I have changed into a tough boy.’ This became her war cry before plunging into difficult expeditions. Her boy would slay monsters and tame unruly waves. Nothing was impossible! She constantly desired to be Deepu.

…and, on Saturdays, returning early from Mumbai, Ma would find the thin child lying sprawled on the old sofa, sound asleep, a toy pistol in one slim hand and a faded doll, in the other. Ma’s eyes would moisten and she would gently lift the lonely child and tug her under a sheet in the bed-room, without fully waking her; her daughter so tender in her grasp…

Smita’s daily excursions suddenly ceased. Dad stopped going to office. He would remain in the bed-room only and hated any sound.

‘Do not disturb Dad. He is not feeling well.’ That was the strict order from a concerned Ma who returned late. She went to far-off Andheri, on the western line, a journey of almost 90 km. Her office was some distance from the railway station. Before returning exhausted, she would buy greens for the family, haggling with the vendors on the platform; then take a crowded bus home. Ma looked tired, almost
ready to drop dead. Fortified by hot tea and a quick wash, she would start dinner preparations. Dad would be sipping his dark evening juice, unconcerned.

Two different worlds, Smita thought. Alone, in her room, she would produce Deepu as her companion invisible to the rest.

Dad was not well. Long afternoons, post-school, Smita would hear him talking on the phone about jobs — any job, anywhere, for any pay. She had never heard him sound so sad! He stopped shaving, got up late, threw tantrums and sometimes drank evening juice in the afternoons also. He listened to dark music during this time. He stopped going out except to buy his juice and packets of cigarettes.

‘What has happened? Why does he not go to office?’ Smita asked.
Ma said nothing.

Smita persisted. It was a Sunday evening. Dad was listening to music in his den, alone.

‘He will soon. Trying hard. Might go to Dubai also,’ Ma said.
But Dad’s moods varied. They alternated between gloomy and aloof.
She wanted her dad to smile, not sulk.
How could she do that?
She prayed often but his moods remained. He stayed in his room. She saw him circling marking spaces in the papers with red pen and searching something on the computer.

But nothing made him smile.

Smita started feeling sorry for him. She wanted to bring cheer into his life. But how? She felt like her favorite crying princess…helpless. She wanted her dad to change from sad guy into a happy one. Then the idea came: If I become Deepu? She was so sure. This plan would make him happy. Deepu. The sibling that was not. That he desired. It surely would work.

One afternoon, unable to bear his loneliness, a desperate but bold Smita turned into Deepu in order to please Dad. She burst into the bed-room, shouting and firing the toy pistol at the same time, muttering, Bang! Bang! She had seen her cousins, all boys, doing that. Firing pistols, fighting each other, ripping apart girls’ dolls and pillows in gleeful destruction. Their mothers and fathers never scolded the violent boys. They approved of the demolition work carried out by the little emperors. She was mimicking those noisy cousins but her mission was noble.

A different reception awaited this act of imitation and loud acting. A dormant volcano erupted on that humid afternoon! Dad looked at her, his eyes red. She saw the cruel king.

‘Why are you creating so much noise? You mad?’

The harshness was shattering. A cannon-ball exploded in her ears. Smita did not reply. Lost her thin voice. Grew mute.

‘Why are you firing a pistol? You, a boy? You, crazy girl! Acting as a tomboy,’ he asked, his eyes appearing redder, his voice stabbing her tender heart, his index finger pointing.

Smita shrank into herself, growing smaller by the second, eyes un-seeing.

Then, Dad, the cruel king snatched the toy from her yielding hands, threw it out of the window and dragged her out of his room, shouting, ‘Give me a break. Do not ruin my life. Already I am tired of life. Leave me ALONE! Understood, you silly girl. Leave me ALONE. Now LEAVE.’ He pushed a shocked he/she out of the room,
his breath smelling of stale tobacco, and he shut the door against her wide-eyed face... with a violent sound that could be heard miles away on that hot summer afternoon in their quiet neighbourhood.

Smita sobbed loudly; then a piping wail issued from her throat as if a spring had once suppressed it. She sat down against the drab white wall of the sad house and cried and cried, her voice unheard in that small suburban Indian home in a working-class neighbourhood. Warm tears covered her frock and drenched her slim body in a deluge that came from the depths of her aching heart.

... and when Ma came home tired and sweating from the long harrowing commute on the local train and bus, carrying groceries and greens in two bags, she found little Smita in high fever, lying unconscious on her narrow creaking bed; a contrite father nearby, applying ice-packs, his eyes red, his face flushed. Ma cried throughout the long night and prayed constantly to Goddess Durga. But Smita never woke from her sound sleep of peace and happiness and drifted away slowly to another world of light and eternal joy called heaven...

After they cremated their only child with the support of close friends, the shattered Sonis could not sleep. Towards the grey dawn, Ma drifted off into a fitful sleep and experienced a strange dream. Terrified, she woke her husband. ‘I had a disturbing dream.’

‘What was that?’ he asked, shaken and withdrawn, hair dishevelled.

‘I saw an angry Durga leaving. It was an omen. A furious Devi deserting her devotees.’ she said, sounding still scared.

‘What else?’ he asked, benumbed by grief.

‘I saw Smita smiling in the oval face of the divine mother. Leaving. Fading gently into the night.’

He listened, eyes wide, an unbidden tear escaping his right eye, searing his sunken cheek. ‘Smita?’

‘Yes. Smita appearing in the image of the goddess. Clear-eyed, smiling shyly, as she always did when I returned home. Her face looked at me from behind the painted face of the idol. As if beckoning me.’

‘Then?’

‘Then, suddenly, I see the goddess mother getting very angry and quitting our home forever. It is not good. We are doomed...’ and Ma began crying at this double loss. Her frail body clad in a cheap saree shook. It was a bleak morning sans the usual sense of joy that dawn always brings. The sun was obscured by drifting clouds and humidity was high. Not a breath of fresh air. The city lay asleep in drab houses tucked away in old buildings along broken roads. Decay was in the air.

A freak summer storm was building up fast on the horizon. The heat became oppressive. Grey clouds were moving from some place in the sky, a menacing mass, moving fast. Lightning struck miles away.

‘I too had a frightening dream,’ he said, finally, tone low, eyes vacant.

Ma’s body shook with her sobs. Silence almost killed her.

‘I saw a huge country... miles and miles of blazing plain, featureless, bereft of trees and people. No soul. Nothing. Only a burning desert. And the sound of my beloved Smita’s happy laughter echoing, turning into a loud dirge. Then receding slowly across the baked plain...’ Dad could not finish. He went to Smita’s room and

‘Change.’ Sunial Sharma.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014.
clutched her doll; eyes dimmed, he began, pleading in a broken voice, ‘Smita, come back to your dad who misses you so much…’

The summer storm that descended on the suburb, swiftly and angrily snapped off electrical wires, blew away the tin roofs of the nearby shops and sign boards and knocked down several trees in a single mighty blow. The velocity of the wind was high, rattling window-panes. Then a dust-storm arrived, followed by heavy rain that fell on the rooves of high-rises; thunder crashed in the inner urban areas. The world became brutal, a place where innocence could never survive.
A few years ago, I travelled to Dinard, a small city in Brittany in France to attend the bicentennial conference on the great Battle of Austerlitz where Napoleon had crushed both Russian and Austrian troops – ‘The sun of Austerlitz.’ Most experts consider the battle Napoleon’s greatest victory.

Since I had arrived early for the conference, I decided to take a stroll around the area where it was being held. The names of the streets were familiar and appropriate for a place where historians were to gather: ‘Clemenceau,’ named for Georges Clemenceau, the ‘tiger’ who had defeated the Germans in World War I; nearby, as it should be, the Rue de Verdun, and one step further, the Boulevard of Wilson, named in honor of the American president who had sent troops to Europe to protect liberty. Yet, while the names and the stories behind them were familiar, nothing actually struck my heart until I came to the Rue de Barra, when something clicked in my mind, causing a stream of association. Barra was a name I well remembered from my Soviet childhood, from my seventh or eighth-grade history book.

As many textbooks do, it demonstrated how malleable was history, how easily it could be changed depending on how the political winds were blowing. For example, in French textbooks the Paris Commune has been prudently extracted from historical memory. And, indeed, why should French children, who should be proud of their country, study a time when the French killed each other on the streets of Paris? In my Soviet textbooks, however, the Paris Commune was proudly included and, of course, the young drummer Barra from the time of the French Revolution made for an interesting little story during that time. Barra had been captured by the monarchists who demanded that he renounce the revolution. He refused and was killed. On the face of it – a small story in a large event.

In Soviet textbooks Barra was prominently presented as a person deserving of emulation. In fact, there was not only a description of the event but a portrait was presented of young Barra who stood defiantly before his captors ready to face death from the spears of the enemy. The prominent space given to Barra in the textbooks of my Soviet youth was hardly accidental. He was duly related to similar youthful heroes/martyrs of Soviet iconography, all of whom had a singular regret: They had only one life to give for their country. This is also the view of a chap whose statue stands in front of CIA headquarters, if I am not mistaken.

The image of Barra, a mere boy, ready to die remained clear in my mind, and the message to be derived from his death was also clear. Yet for some reason I could not remember his actual words before he was put to death, which troubled me on a deep level. I put this aside, though, so I could concentrate on what had brought me to Dinard in the first place.

The Napoleonic Society had organised the conference and, as it was open to the public, I thought that I would find a room full of people, but there was actually only a handful. We sat in a hall surrounded by an exposition of stamp collections and pictures that displayed Napoleon’s career. Several people took the floor to give welcoming speeches. The mayor of Dinard opened the conference with a speech in

‘The Apotheoses of Young Barra.’ Dmitry Shlapentokh. 
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which he stressed that it was a great honor for his city to host such a prestigious gathering. He also gave his take on Napoleon. According to the mayor, Napoleon had sacrificed his life to benefit France and implicitly Europe. Then a couple of descendants of Joachim Murat, one of the most celebrated of French marshals, appeared before the public. One was a young girl, with a charming smile, dressed in a simple peasant dress. She bowed her head to the public and sat down. The other representative of Murat’s family, a tall man, made a speech with a pointed message. His great ancestor and the emperor had toiled for only one goal: liberty.

After this, there was a break and this afforded me the chance to walk around the building where the conference was taking place. Here there was an exhibition dedicated to Napoleon. Another participant in the conference, a historian, told me that the conference had such a low profile and had been relegated to such a god-forsaken place as Dinard because Napoleon and empire was now out of fashion. The ‘politically correct’ view for the French, as all other European countries, was to emphasise the rule of law rather than the violence of conquest.

I walked off to continue my tour, observing the banners of the La Grande Armée and the sundry weaponry of the period, all of which were the property of the city of Dinard as it was duly stated. Finally, I came to the room where the Battle of Austerlitz was being reenacted. I entered the room with the other visitors, mostly Frenchmen. Little figurines – representatives of the great army and Russian and Austrian troops – stood in solemn order. And then over speakers came the sounds of battle – the heavy steps of the guards, the staccato of the horses’ hoofs, the roar of the guns. There was even a simulation of the smoke as the frontal attack of the French on Pratzen Heights began.

At first, the French in the audience looked upon the display with the indifference of bored tourists, but as the sound of the guns increased and the French figurines seemed to be pressing harder and harder against the lines of the Austrian and Russian troops, you could see the spark in their eyes, a gleam that was hardly politically correct. And then as the battle was culminating and the terse voice of the emperor declares: ‘Soldiers, I am proud of you’ and as the chords of the Marseilles swell over the room, the glint in their eyes transformed again. Across the room I spotted one Frenchman whose eyes seemed to be shining with ecstasy as he assumed the posture of a soldier at attention, ready to salute.

The feeling emanating from him was almost palpable. Pushed to the back of his brain, I imagined, was the politically correct European Constitution, the present-day dictum of conformity that has spread across Western Europe, a dull conformity that postulates a love for ‘diversity,’ an aversion to viewing women as ‘sex objects,’ and a diet of green vegetables with lots of healthy vitamins and no cholesterol. However, at that moment, I imagined that those in the grip of that particular moment craved nationalistic bias, the joy of endless, raw sex, and a high calorie diet, only slightly cooked in the water of civilisation and, of course, a lot of blood. And those who proclaimed otherwise were either impotent or simply caged in the great ‘panoptikon’ of political correctness, as Foucault would have proclaimed if he were alive and not being censored by the grand dames from Women’s Studies departments and officious clerks from Affirmative Action offices. These people wanted nothing but ‘liberty.’ This is the way it is from Washington to Paris, from Paris to Moscow. Maybe, just maybe, this is the message of young Barra, the drummer.
I left the room and wandered through the corridor where paintings that depicted some aspect of Napoleon’s life were hanging on the walls. Many were from Russia and had been brought to Dinard specifically for the conference. One of them depicted Alexander, the victor over Napoleon, dressed in a beribboned, elegant uniform. He stood stately and erect, as if gazing down upon the visitors. He seemed the very picture of state might, and it was easy to see why Russian poets and historians had glorified the greatness of the Russian state which, for most of them, had been made manifest in the victory over Napoleon.

However, while Napoleon has received similar acclaim from writers, there was a significant difference between the two men. Although it was true that Russian peasants had fought and died in the war against the French, their love for the state and their emperor was not overwhelming as was the case with Napoleon and the French. In Russia, it was the elite who worshipped the state, not the populace – a trend that continues to this day. In Imperial Russia, at the time of the battle of Austerlitz, it was not unusual for even members of the Imperial Guard to desert. During World War I, Russian soldiers deserted en masse, oblivious to the call of their officers to defend the homeland. In 1991, at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, not even one detachment tried to save the country. While one can criticise Russians – at least in comparison to the French – as unpatriotic, the assumption would only partly be true. It is the absence of worshipping the state that has made it possible for Russians to look differently upon the results of the empire and the great battles of their emperor.

Near the portrait of Alexander hung another picture: Vereshchagin’s painting of Borodino. The picture represents an episode from the French victory, an important part of the battlefield. The victorious French are in exaltation, yelling and waving their helmets. But this triumph is not the message of the picture; this lies on the periphery where the focus is quite sharp. What is seen are heaps of corpses, of mutilated human bodies whose faces are frozen in death’s agony. Peeking out from the pile is a bayonet dripping blood. This, too, I submit is the message of young Barra.

At the front of the exhibition was a painting of the young Bonaparte crossing the San Bernard. What else had David painted? Of course, Marat: his hand hanging limply over the bathtub, his pale, powerless body, Christ taken from the cross. And the picture of young Barra, the boy Christ with a gaping wound. And it was clear what young Barra had screamed in the moments before his death: ‘Fraternite!’ – Brotherhood (the French empire).

All of this brings to recall a trip I took to Turkey where I had walked alone along the central streets of Istanbul, Constantinople, the second Rome, the second capital of the empire. The streets teemed with stores full of people from the former USSR, mostly those from the Turkic-speaking states. One of them, an Azeri, accosted me. ‘Where are you from, white man?’ he asked, his eyes dull with hatred. He did not wait for my answer but began a long diatribe: ‘I know, you’re from Europe, from somewhere in the West. I hate you all. You destroyed my country, the USSR.’ He added that he came from the great city of Baku where everyone had lived as brothers and sisters – Russians, Jews, and even Armenians. He said that he’d had several girlfriends, at the same time, ‘Russians, Jews, and believe it or not – I don’t care – Armenians.’ He wondered aloud why the Turks had not slaughtered us all. A Turkish woman who seemed to understand so me Russian nodded in agreement. ‘Yes, yes. Under Ottoman rule everyone lived as brothers and sisters, all peoples, all Armenians,
regardless what they say about us. And in his harem our Sultan made love to women from all over the empire: Jewish, Hungarian, and of course many Slavic women.’ The sultans, according to her accounts, were universal men. My Azeri acquaintance looked at me with a gloomy longing. ‘Yes, it’s true. I had girlfriends of all nationalities. We lived as brothers and sisters in a great state.’

Empire here, then, was not attacks by phallic bayonets, nor was it even a Casanova-style seduction of the innocent, rather it was something different. Empire here was an exchange of genitalia, a great communal gathering where bodies were given as acts of charity, love and universal brotherhood. Yes, it was ‘fraternite,’ that is, empire is the brotherhood of nations, a brotherhood of people that did not require a constitution to detail its citizens’ rights because rights were embedded in the heart. And it is quite possible that the words of young Barra held a similar meaning.

Of course, I thought a great society is impossible without more than liberty and brotherhood. There must be justice. ‘Justice,’ smirked the young Russian women whom I had met on the train to Dinard. She looked at me with the sort of contempt one usually reserves for idiots. A group of thugs had killed her brother in Ekaterinburg merely because he had refused to give up his apartment for practically nothing. They had beaten him to death. And the authorities had buried him in a cemetery for anonymous corpses. The only good thing about the cemetery was that at least the bodies did not have to share a coffin. Her mother had been out of town when the murder took place, but when she came back she asked for an investigation. The authorities said that there had been no signs of a violent death. ‘We wrote to everybody, including Putin. No answer. And you want justice? Man, you must be crazy.’

During the next session of the conference, the presentation was boring and I hardly understood what was being discussed. And the reason was clear: I was a civilian, not a military man. The only things I gleaned from the session were that the emperor was a brilliant commander and no one could stand against his genius. Thus, his victory at Austerlitz had been inevitable.

After this session, I strolled around the exhibition with an American graduate student. We paused to look at a Berezin lithograph of the Grand Army crossing a semi-frozen river in its retreat from Russia. The frozen bank of the river was littered with corpses. These people had died not from bayonet attacks as in the Borodino painting; instead they had died slowly from starvation and the cold. Those alive had been too weak to defend themselves from the approaching Bashkir cavalry of the Russian army. Only a few of the grizzly veterans, possibly members of the Imperial Guard, stood and grimly looked at the approaching Mongol horde with grim determination.

‘Dmitry,’ the graduation student remarked, ‘you know about these things better than I. Right now, I have no chance of a job. If I would write something about Soviet lesbians or Inuits at the time of the first five-year plan and place it in the context of Foucault-Derrida kind of theories, they might forgive me – the people who do the hiring might forgive me for being a white, straight male. But the subject of my dissertation had nothing to do with these subjects.’ Of course, he didn’t want to hear any homilies about fair play and justice, so I kept my silence.

He told me that he had recently read Stalin’s ‘Short Course of VKPB,’ the history of the communist party. He thought it contained a particularly good

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description of capitalist society. ‘You might laugh, Dmitry,’ he said, ‘but I have come
to the conclusion Uncle Joe was right. You probably remember the statement of the
protagonist of Ivan Karamazov: ‘Our father is a swine, but his ideas are right.’ Yes,
Stalin was right. You cannot fight against overwhelming odds.’

It was hot and humid in the exhibition hall, and I wandered outside to cool off.
I found myself once again strolling down the street named for Barra, the young
drummer boy whose picture I vividly remember from my eighth grade history book.
At that moment the text was clear in mind, and I mentally leafed through its pages.
After Barra, there had been a picture of Francois Noel Babeuf, who had initiated ‘The
Plot of Equal.’ I remembered the pages of Buonaroty telling us – Soviet children –
that the terms liberty and democracy accompanied only by a rubber smile were
nothing. The smiles protected the power and privileges of the elite. And the text also
showed a big picture of weavers from Lyon who had suffered from unemployment
and misery when their factories were closed in 1832.

The weavers had stood in a line, but this was not the well-arranged, stately line
of the Imperial Guard. The line was shaky and unstable and comprised solely of white
males. I do not remember the painter depicting one woman or member of a minority
group. Some members of the line were lying on the ground, presumably because
troops had shot them. Those who had managed to stay on their feet waved a black flag
that proclaimed: ‘To work living or die fighting.’ Their expressions were not one of
defiance, but of victory as if those who would kill them had recoiled in horror. The
image was both horrible and pleasing at the same time. It touched something in deep
within me; something that I hoped might provide me with a clue to remembering
the message of young Barra, which had been bothering me since I arrived in Dinar.

As the images from the text played in my mind, I once again remembered my
trip to Istanbul. After the conversation with the Azeri, I had continued to walk until I
reached a square surrounded by several mosques. Crowding the square were dozens
of policemen in full combat gear. There were also quite a few cameras, and I
understood that something important was taking place, at least from the point of view
of the police. Shortly, a crowd of young men appeared waving flags depicting the
famous portrait of Che Guevara. As I had no desire to be part of a skirmish between
police and demonstrators, I hurried into the yard of one of the mosques. From above
came a booming voice, as if someone were sounding a battle cry: ‘Allah Akbar.’
Hundreds of men, possibly thousands, fell to the ground in prayer. They stood and
then came another roar from above: ‘Allah Akbar.’ The crowd stood once again
primed for attack, ready to kill and to be killed. Grim determination was on their
faces, a look I had seen in the faces of the workers that had followed the pictures of
young Barra in my eighth grade history textbook. And at that moment, the image of
Barra reemerged in my mind. But this image was quite different from the one from
my eighth-grade textbook.

I was leaving the conference the next morning, on the 14 of July, so I spent the
night in a hotel. As I was boarding the plane, some tourists, quite possibly because it
was July 14, had turned on a radio and I heard the sound of the ‘Marseilles.’ Someone
shouted out, ‘Please turn down the radio.’ The radio was turned off but the sound
continued to pulsate, louder and louder, in my mind, ‘Alors . . .’ Its intensity was too
much, so I leaned back to rest.

As I started to close my eyes, a blaze of lightning struck the plane. This was

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unexpected, to say the least, and the face of the passenger seated behind me was frozen in a rictus of horror, as if he were facing an imminent, horrible death. He could not speak. And at that very moment the message of young Barra came to me – clear and sharp. Yet it had come too late for me, for I was falling into a bottomless, dark pit of sleep, a sleep without dreams, without hope.
Graham

It is possible to be alive and dead at the same time. To live as though there is nothing left to be done, no work to conclude, no relationship to foster, no love to feel. It is possible to know that your death is so certain and so near that you are already in the throes of it. To be in the heart of death, to be living the pain of hell, to be absent to your loved ones, while your body obstinately withers.

For years Marion built walls, much higher and stronger than those in our Smith Street home, so that when my day came she would be protected from her grief. I ignored this because it was more than I could bear. I blamed my fragile muscles, bones, nerves and tendons. But we realised that later the remorse for our lost days would come, so we chose a different path. The shadow of death will no longer be a companion, throbbing by my side. I will walk to death. My way.

My mind is claw-sharp. It has to be, otherwise I would not be deemed fit to make this decision. I have studied the brochure and watched the web videos and attended the mandatory counselling with sweet-faced Claudine.

My questions have been answered, all of them. Marion and I said our long goodbyes in the way that people who have been married for forty years can do. It took weeks and was sad and funny and felt like a gift.

Marion

Graham and I attended the Final Destination’s christening. It made us feel like we were part of something bigger than just our pain. We watched Captain Mertens hand Queen Beatrice a bottle of champagne, which she cracked across the ship’s monstrous hull and said in French, Flemish and English, ‘May your travels be comfortable and your final destination glorious.’ The ship was officially put into service and an hour later we boarded. I wheeled Graham around the ship and we marvelled at the gilt sculptures in the atrium, the shopping mall with gifts of memorial photos, engraved pens and Belgian chocolate, and the peaceful spray of the neon-lit water feature. We sat down to our evening meal – the silverware was stamped A835 in a barrel lozenge and the wine imported from all the right regions in Europe, Australia and the US – and retired to our cabin to sleep on 400 thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets.

As the sun rose the following day, the Final Destination encountered a protest vessel. The Life Warrior had apparently been following us since Zeebrugge. She sidled dangerously close and the protesters stood on deck with their posters, frowning at us, shameful sinners. The two vessels, ours enormous and imposing, theirs small and pugnacious, cruised into the international waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, each watching the other with suspicion.

On the third day, the Captain of the Life Warrior took to the megaphone. ‘So do not fear, for I am with you! Do not be dismayed, for I am your God! I will strengthen you and help you! I will sustain you and rescue you!’
Graham
These protestors continue to follow us and blast us with their monologues of death and doom. Don’t they know that all of us have looked death in the eye, given it a teasing butterfly kiss to test how it reacts? We have questioned death more deeply than any of the truly living. We understand it and know it for what it is. It is hard for them to hurt us now.

Anyway, many of us are old and deaf.

Marion
The night before the burial, Captain Mertens addressed the ship over the PA. ‘Thank you for entrusting us with your dignified burial. Tomorrow your suffering will end. It is important that you know that despite our attempts to outrun her, the Life Warrior continues to follow us. I have been informed that she is approximately thirty nautical miles from us now, and gaining. By the time we begin the ceremony tomorrow, I expect she will be alongside us again. Unfortunately, we have no power to have her removed from international waters. She is within her rights to be here. As are you. I remind you that you are not breaking any laws. As passengers on the Final Destination in international waters you are subject only to the laws of Belgium. I ask you to remain strong, one final time, and trust that we will protect you and undertake your final request with dignity.’

At the conclusion of the Captain’s speech silence echoed through the ship. I imagined it to be like those moments as the Titanic sunk, as those clinging to her rails or scavenging from pockets of oxygen knew that a gulp of icy ocean was inevitable and that they were powerless against it.

‘Marion, can you take me to the foredeck, please?’
I wheeled Graham to the bow of the ship, set his brakes and sat down next to him on the polished oak seat, resting my hand on the brass rail. The sky was cloudless but Graham watched the water of the North Atlantic, today as dark as Indian ink.

I took my husband’s hand. My weathered but pliable skin pressed against his fleshless bones. We sat on the foredeck long enough to see flying fish frolicking in the water below. The sun was starting to set and the air turning to chill when another boat appeared on the horizon.

‘Let’s go in,’ I said.

By morning, all preparations had been made. The crew were efficient and precise, professional and sombre. A few passengers had changed their minds, as had been expected. But Graham was ready, as was I.

At our final counselling session Claudine spoke very little. I missed the sound of her voice – her English, with its lovely French lilt, reminded me of being in Paris with Graham on our honeymoon – and I wanted to hear more of it. But Claudine left an empty space for us to fill.

In the adjoining chamber, which held a large bed facing a metre-wide porthole and a small array of medical equipment, the appointed doctor and nurse waited. We could have as much time with Claudine as we needed, but we were ready. We had said our long goodbyes and this morning there was not much we still needed to say. Throughout our married life we had been frank with each other and to both our amusement we discovered that the vast majority of the things we said over the years...
were positive.

‘Telling each other any final thoughts is an important part of the process,’
Claudine eventually advised.

Was there anything left to say? It seemed petty to drag up complaints now, but
I trusted Claudine.

‘I wish you’d been around more when the children were little, Graham,’ I said.
‘I wish I had been too. I should have worked less. We should have had more
holidays, like this delightful cruise,’ Graham said.

Graham could always make me laugh, no matter how dire the situation.

We fell into silence.

After a while Claudine spoke. ‘I’m satisfied that you are ready. Are you both
satisfied also?’

Holding hands, we nodded.

Claudine signed the consent form, acknowledging Graham’s fitness of mind
and understanding of the consequences of the transaction. Graham and I signed our
forms too, and I wheeled him into the adjoining room.

Graham

That she would do this for me, on top of everything else, is unimaginable. She will
take me to the edge of life, holding my hand to ease my fears, leaving no room for her
own fears to visit her. She will be brave. It is easy for me and so much harder for her,
left with days, months and years to wonder and question and feel. I know she will ask
herself if we did the right thing in the end. I look forward to not feeling a thing. My
brain has been troubled by pain for so long that it is impossible to remember the
lightness, the ease that comes with its absence. At the beginning of my disease I could
blast myself into the background and be free enough, my eyeballs floating, my mind a
jalopy and my body a jigsaw put back together by chemicals which took away my
ability to finish sentences but locked away my pain. The soup of coloured capsules I
swallowed day and night dissolved the infrastructure of my life and made it blissful
enough for a while. Until they stopped working.

Afterwards, Marion will still have life to contend with, with no soup
concoction to comfort her, not even my warm hand to hold.

Marion

I touched Graham’s arm as he swallowed the liquid that prepared his stomach. I held
his hand after his body was arranged on the bed. I grimaced with him as the needles
were inserted into his lax and abused veins. I lay with him on the wide bed as the fluid
was injected into the IV line.

We looked out at the ocean and spoke in whispers to each other as we waited.

I stayed with Graham for an hour after it was done, holding his hand tightly.

After the tears stopped I studied my mind to see if it had been changed by this
experience. Had Graham’s passing, graceful and quiet in the end, proved anything?
Had there been angels waiting who turned him away? Was there anything left of him
in this physical body that should be preserved in some other way? I could find no
reason to believe in any of these things. I had farewelled my husband, the love of my
life. He was gone. I would bear witness when his body, an empty vessel sewn tightly
into weighted canvas, was delivered to the sea.

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The burials began on schedule at fifteen-hundred hours. The crew, on this their first mission, appeared to function beyond the sum of their parts. The *Life Warrior* lay at anchor at a disrespectful distance, silently judging us.

As the crew brought the bodies to the burial deck, where families and crew were assembled in tight and dignified lines, the protestors on the *Life Warrior* held hands in a silent vigil of prayer.

Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* played over the *Final Destination*’s PA. I hugged my arms around my waist. The wind was shifting. The breeze had blown gently all morning, but now it was billowing in an unseasonal bluster from the north, blowing Barber’s music over the *Final Destination* and the *Life Warrior* alike. The canvas-cocooned bodies slipped gently into the sea as the strings wove a warm nest around me and the wind whipped my hair into my eyes in an act of exuberant defiance.