

Island

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It's summer on the Sunshine Coast. Dinner is a roast in the oven. Fiona and her girls have been preparing the meal all afternoon. Uncle Albert has brought the dessert – three chocolate mud cakes from Woolies. Everyone is drinking as flies twitch around a plate of stale camembert and hummus on the verandah. The smell of chlorine-soaked towels hangs in the air. Empty beer bottles glisten on the railings as the sun pours through them. There are wet footprints throughout the house, and something in the air like eternity.

You find yourself standing in the garage, lined-up against an off-white wall in a pair of floral board shorts and a singlet. Uncles and aunties, grandparents, and grandchildren, second cousins, and partners of second cousins. Everyone's smiling and wrapping their arms around one another. Uncle Albert props his phone against a gin and tonic before running back to kneel in front of the group. The camera flashes and you all grin.

As everyone is about to leave Margie suggests a photo with just the boys. It's an unusual request, even for her. And despite there being some groans and some sighs, you all do as you are told. Greg and his sons stand tall at the back, their pale white skin made even more dull by their black polo shirts. You stand at the edge of the group, towards the outskirts, but Margie asks you to move closer in. She motions this with her hand. And as you squeeze your way to the front you can feel the collective attempt to avoid touching.

Once the photo is taken you remove yourself from the group as quickly as possible, accidentally kicking your toe on the ping-pong table and resisting the urge to swear.

You take yourself to the spare bedroom you've claimed for the week. A single bed pressed into the corner of the room. The blankets have dinosaurs on them. There's a bookshelf with each of the *Harry Potter* titles lined up against one another, a desk with a gaming PC, and a map of the world hanging by a thumbtack with some string.

The taste of hummus and camembert hangs in the back of your throat as the weight in your chest begins to make itself known again. And before you slip away your cousin Harley knocks on the door. He's just returned from his afternoon nap. His tweedy blonde hair sticks up in places, and even though he's been drinking heavily the last few days, still looks well. He wraps his stenchy armpit around your neck and hands you a cold beer, but you wave it away. He shrugs and opens it with the palm of his hand before taking a swig.

"Is it really that bad?" he asks.

You grab your iPhone and show him the picture of Alison kissing some guy called Friedrich. The image still hits you like a tsunami. The two are standing together as the sun sets behind them. Judging from the creases around his eyes, you've made the assumption Friedrich is about ten years older than you. And from his Facebook profile you've been able to deduce he's French, surfs, and has a full-time job in software engineering.

"What the hell?" Harley says. "Mate, I'm so sorry."

Harley appears genuinely upset, his face turning soft, his voice going softer.

"Have you tried calling?" he asks.

"She won't answer."

"So you're done then?"

"I guess," you reply.

Harley takes another sip of beer, before looking at the map of the world.

"You should take some time off," he says, standing to look closer at the map.

"Travel somewhere. That's what I did when Lisa broke up with me."

You shake your head and contemplate drinking into the night, but the thought of being hungover is too overwhelming. Harley takes out his iPhone and begins typing something in, his eyes narrowing on the light of the screen.

"Let's go to Japan," he says.

“Japan?”

“It’s a thousand bucks return. That’s the cheapest it’s been in ages.”

Harley regularly checks the prices of airfares. It’s one of his things.

You know he is serious too. He once drove five hours to Jindabyne at midnight just for the heck of it. He’d asked you to go, at the time, but you had an assessment due that week.

You contemplate the idea of travel while still battling the thoughts that seem to only ever take you further and further down.

“I don’t think I can,” you say, before releasing a deep sigh.

Harley takes another swig of beer before clunking it on the bedside table.

“I’m booking us flights. And we’re going.”

Mid-air you see the ocean swirling and heaving beneath you. An airline hostess with a red scarf is serving a round of drinks. When she finally reaches you, you ask for a *Sprite*. She hands you a mini can – half the size of its regular version. You take a sip and continue flicking through an old newspaper someone has left behind. The headline at the top mentions an increase of refugees in the Middle East. Your heart seems to weigh down in your chest as you read on. You decide to stow the paper in the pouch in front of you. Harley is fast asleep, wearing an eye mask and a maroon scoop neck tee, drool pooling onto his shoulder. Someone is watching *The Shawshank Redemption* three rows in front, and you fall asleep looking at their screen.

From the airport you don’t really take notice of much. Instead, you drag your suitcase in a kind of stupor, as one of the wheels pinches along the ground refusing to roll like the others. Not long after the airport you find yourself sitting on a train. And not long after that you arrive at Kuwana station, your thoughts still spinning. It’s only a short walk from the train station to the nearby hotel, and yet, you feel like a few hours could’ve just passed.

Harley found the place for a good price. The outside of the building looks cold and masculine. An elderly man with hardly any wrinkles is standing at the front door. He’s waving you in, his skinny arms dangling from his baggy white shirt.

Inside the hotel the elderly man goes behind his desk and grabs two pink pamphlets. There’s a confident air about him as he directs you to follow. You get the sense he’s the manager, though he’s not wearing a badge or a uniform. Just t-shirt, tracksuit pants, a pair of socks and some sliders. He moves by the numbered doors with

slow methodical steps, and there's something calm and soothing about the way he does this.

"Brothers?" the man asks.

"Cousins," Harley replies.

"You look very similar. Same faces," the man pauses for a second. "You know, we have a festival tomorrow. Many people will be there. You two should go visit."

"Is it far?" you ask.

"Not far. Get the train to Tado station and just a short walk from there."

"What's the festival for?"

The elderly man stops in front of room twelve and fiddles with his ring of keys. At first, you think you've made a faux pas. But then he turns and looks at you.

"Each year, six boys are chosen. They must ride to the top of a steep track on horseback and jump a three-metre wall at the summit. Jumping the mound is very difficult. But it is believed to bring a good harvest to the land. If he reaches the summit, the boy becomes a man."

He opens the door to your room, which is much smaller than you expected. There are some transparent curtains trying to keep the light out, and a thin mattress rolled out on the floor. He hands you the two pink pamphlets – menus for a restaurant called *Ronin*.

"Make sure you get there early," he says, before turning to leave, his sliders clicking against his heels as he disappears down the corridor.

You find yourself squeezing past hordes of people into a narrow street through a haze of ramen and takoyaki infused with yakitori and beer. Shrill flutes whine from cheap megaphones set high above the day on telegraph poles. Weeds poke out of cracked bitumen. Teenagers wearing brown kimonos and standing on milk crates chant drinking songs for all to hear. A father wearing a golf visor claps enthusiastically. Two tiny grandmas walk by with bent backs. A stylish couple with matching bleached hair share a cigarette by a vending machine. A child looks up and giggles at you.

You lose Harley almost immediately to a corn-stand at the entrance of the village and decide to venture in without him. The movement of the crowd leads you to the bottom of the hill where thousands of people have gathered. The racetrack looks to be about 300 metres long, though you've never been good at judging distance, or

numbers in a crowd. You pick a place to stand, not far from the fence-line, as the flutes continue to screech from the megaphones high above.

After a few minutes you notice a boy in samurai attire being lifted onto a horse. The crowd quietens. The flutes go silent. The boy gives a nod and the horse is slapped on the rump. It then begins to move with ferocious speed. The crowd cheers. At first, it looks as though the horse will summit the slope with ease. But before it reaches the mound it bucks the young boy high into the air. Several men in brown kimonos attempt to catch him. The boy's feet never touch the ground as he is carried off into the distance.

The crowd stops cheering, and the day seems to pause while the horse is led away. A fog hovers over the nearby rice fields as the next horse is being prepared. And in the stillness of the festival your thoughts enter the murkiness once more. You try to think of something else, but you can't help but remember the time she nearly fell through the gap on the train, and how you pulled her up at just the right moment, and how you both laughed and she squeezed your hand, and how beautiful she looked in her red beret that cold winter's day. You think about the man she's with, and whether she's happier with him, and your heart throbs from your neck. And so, to take your mind off things, you try to imagine what the horse is thinking.

The boy is worthy. I feel his spirit in my chest. He does not sit clumsily on my back like the others. He is strong, like my father. And as I look at the mountain ahead I realise my head wants to do what my body may not be capable of doing. I am also a little aroused, but unashamedly. Perhaps, if I throw him off, I could rise to the top alone? This idea does not sit well with me. We must be heroes together. My rider will be lifted high and celebrated and I will be given good food and drink and he will be looked after well. Hold on, dear boy. I am taking us over the mountain.

You feel a little odd for attempting to assume what another species might think. And yet, it seems to be helping you. You turn to the next contender who is facing the slope and decide to do the same with him. You begin just by looking at him, and then assume he is probably braver than you. Not that this is saying much. You wouldn't exactly call yourself brave. But there's something wild about the way he holds himself, the strength in his eyes, the fact he's willing to ride a horse up a mountain. You wonder if you would be capable of such a thing, and quickly come to realise you would not. Perhaps that was one of the reasons she decided to leave. Maybe you weren't man enough. And because

your thoughts are turning again, you think back to what the boy on the horse might be thinking.

The sound of a thunderous slap sends me racing. The crowd smudges into a blur as we make our ascent towards the mountain. I do my best to absorb the gallop. But his body is extremely powerful. My heart beats out of my neck and the wind rushes my eyes as I struggle to hold on. I hope people don't think I'm crying, because I'm not crying – it's just that the air makes my eyes water. The cheering of the crowd is rushing into me like a storm and it makes my hands slippery and my mouth turn to cotton. I try not to let the horse sense this. Instead, I fix my eyes on the mountain and remain focused. I think about my family. I think about the spirits watching over me from the trees and the dirt and the sky. I try to picture myself atop the mountain. Then I promise myself I will bring my province the harvest. I will bring my province the harvest.

As you watch the boy climb the mountain, you realise his thoughts, too, can only ever remain unknowable. Any attempt to know what he's thinking is in vain. But there's something about this process, about the matter of unknowability, that comforts you. The more you fix your mind on him, the less you think about the pain of remembering what you once had.

You've watched as horses have tried and failed to summit the slope. But none have moved with as much force as this magnificent creature. It moves up the mountain with a preternatural strength. Its legs are, by far, the strongest and leanest of all the horses you've seen today. And this, your mother once told you, is the best way to identify if a horse is fast – you look at the strength of the legs. You begin to wonder how the boy can even see, given his helmet is covering his eyes and is bouncing as he rides. He looks sixteen, maybe seventeen. It's hard to tell amongst all his armour.

As he gathers more speed a man with a beard and a blue parka appears in the middle of the track. He's pointing his arm at the horse, which doesn't seem to be slowing down. The crowd shouts at him as the police make their way through the horde, their batons raised high above their heads. It looks like a scene from *The Benny Hill Show*. Perhaps he's from PETA? Or drunk? You are almost compelled to applaud him. Though, it seems unlikely his efforts will make a difference. As the horse gathers more speed, you visualise the man and the animal colliding, the boy falling and crashing to

the ground. A voice in honorific Japanese interrupts the flutes to make an important public announcement. *Please, everyone must stay away from the track.* Of course, the voice does not refer to everyone, but to the one man who refuses to move.

The man in the blue parka is not afraid. Or if he is, he hides it well. That is until, out of nowhere, something crawls onto the track and startles him. It looks like a squirrel. But its movement is much more dignified than that. You see the creature curl its bushy tail around the man's legs, before stretching its paws out in the sun and yawning. The man looks down and tries to shoo it away with his boot. The cat hisses and runs towards the forest. Moments before the horse is about to collide with the man in the blue parka a policeman pulls him over the fence. His parka ripples in the horse's windy wake. A collective sigh of relief releases into the air, like a balloon fading into a pin dot in the sky.

The horse continues up the slope, taking charge over the mountain. Moments before it reaches the summit, it launches its body into the air, clearing the mound that stands before it. Its hooves pound the dirt and the saké and the salt. Then, it turns its head valiantly to the left. The crowd shouts. *The harvest will come! The harvest will come!* The crowd carefully removes the boy from the horse, hoisting him high in the air like a trophy. The boy is crying and doesn't seem to care.

Inside the train is warm and clean and quiet. The rice fields fill with water and the sky has turned to a delicious grey. Harley appears in good spirits, his face full of awe and adventure. He smiles at you as he shows you the photos he took on his digital camera. He shows you a great photo of the boy and the horse reaching the summit.

"I reckon you could do it," Harley says. "I reckon you could ride one of those horses up the mountain."

You shake your head and wave off the idea, though something inside you starts to believe him.

Harley turns and lifts his camera to capture the train driver sitting behind some glass. The driver is wearing a pristine uniform with spotless white gloves. Every so often, he motions at what he is doing, like a holy priest performing a religious ceremony. As the rain hits the window, the train driver switches on the wipers. The droplets that have beaded up against the windshield, distorting his vision ever so slightly, get whisked away. And as you fall asleep on the quiet warm carriage, you think of the drunk teenagers in brown kimonos, the horses racing up an impossible slope, and the flutes

that permeated the day – each of these happenings filling you with an intangible force that has somehow restored you.

Three weeks pass until you finally arrange to meet. Her first words to you are that your teeth look yellower. You are not sure if yellower is even a word, but you tell her it's because the toothpaste in Japan doesn't have any fluoride.

“Did you ever brush your teeth while you were there?” she asks.

“Of course,” you reply, wishing you didn't answer.

A small portion of the confidence you gained from travelling leaves your body. She looks away and the silence takes its hold again. Your heart is shaky, but you remain hopeful. She looks at you, with her brown eyes, and for a moment, your entire life feels like it's locked somewhere between her lips. Then the words come out of her like honey.

“Are you hungry?”

You nod. She grabs her keys and you both head outside.

You walk to a nearby café that has wobbly wooden tables with succulents balancing on top of them. There is a buzz of excitement surrounding the place and you enter the noise before finding a spot to sit down. Electronic music pulses from a cheap boombox covered in stickers, which sits precariously above the caramel slices. A few shavings of brown sugar and egg yolk stick to your table and you wait to rest your arms until it gets wiped down. When the waiter arrives, he wipes the table before asking if you'd like something to drink. You order a large latte and she gets a regular cap and a soda water.

“The music's too loud here,” she says to you.

You nod and stare down at the menu, without really taking it in.

“So what was Japan like?”

At first, you aren't sure how to respond. The festival comes to mind, though you hesitate to describe it, as if describing it might ruin it. Instead, you say Japan was great, that it was everything you imagined and more. She flashes a row of her slightly crooked teeth, the ones you have grown to love. Then the silence moves in again. Finally, she looks up, says there's something she needs to tell you.

You leave the café in opposite directions. The pavement is slippery as you move up the busy street. And with every moment that passes, you feel her climbing further and further away from the thought of you. You squeeze past a horde of bright-eyed schoolboys jabbering in a cloud of Lynx deodorant, then continue up Fitzroy Street past

the Captain Cook Hotel. The city moves by as though on a conveyor belt. Jacaranda trees hang from above as the afternoon sun settles through them. The fallen purple flowers turn to bruised goo beneath your feet. You tell yourself, if your phone rings, it will be a sign. But it doesn't. So, you keep walking. The tether continues to stretch. Her tidal force draws you back, before expelling you out again. Something about moving and not stopping has helped. Though you aren't sure if this feeling will ever leave you – this weight inside your chest. As you walk past the golden gates of Royal Randwick Racecourse, the smell of horses rises into the air. And you long to hear those precious flutes, which have been replaced by the drone of cars veering in and out of lanes, honking and screeching at each other.

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