

# **The Shadows in your Face**

The ions of a weather change shifted between us. Cooling, like your hand on my arm after dangling fingers out the car window as we drove through pine forest. Late afternoon light flared orange as sun dropped below hills. It'd lit grey that morning like the skin of people in nursing homes. I'd noticed the shadows in your face at the time. Your features listless, purple new moons curving under eyes. You looked at me when I asked what's wrong. You used to sing inside rooms, your voice ricocheting off walls. I stood close to feel the press of your songs, to touch your shoulders, your warmth.

Later I listened to you sleeping. Soft rhythms of breath lifted and fell. Hail pinged off the windscreen, fragmenting before slapped away by wipers.

"It's raining so hard an inland sea will be here by morning." You never heard me or saw my head shake glumly. Rain cascaded down the windscreen, as if we drove underwater. I parked under the span of an overpass. The downpour eased, still sluicing past us in gutters, steaming off bitumen. You slept on. I watched your mouth, slightly apart as if you drew breath to whisper to me.

"Where are we?" you finally asked. Said I didn't even know what season it was here. Growing season, wet season, summer or harvest season. We drove to the next town, log trucks overtaking us, trailing tornadoes of churning wind.

"I don't want children," you'd said. Your feet painted with black nail polish planted on the glovebox. You told me we'd have to hate children to bring them into this world. This corrupt, collapsing, over heated, doomed world. When you said that I felt a space in me, as if I'd coughed something up. Children meant hope and belief in the future I said. But you turned to the window, looking out.

We stayed in a caravan park on a cliff. The car banged over smooth rocks bulging from the dirt road.

I wasn't surprised by the strength of your hands. Yesterday you'd gripped my shoulder so tightly a line of yellow bruises pocked my skin. Delicate as dabs from finger painting. This morning we stopped to buy a small box of oranges. They smelt like sap and I inhaled them so their residue of coarse skins settled in lungs and blood. You sliced away the top of one, squeezing hard so your fingers turned white and juice dripped heavily into your mouth. Then you held the orange above my lips so I felt drops landing like rain tapping. Seeds pushed out and I swallowed them too.

That night I recalled when we met. Nervousness and yearning collided in my chest the first time we spoke. I'd followed your eyes, half smiles, shy looks into your lap, your head

tilting up in laughter, neck round and smooth. Later I let you overwhelm me, your feet hooked behind my back like links in a chain.

Our caravan was last in the row. Brine smells and mosquitoes gusted through a gap in the window. I slept against your back despite the heat. Felt the stirrings of your dreams, the murmuring dialect of them. Northerlies blew and I noticed mangroves gusting wet earth odours as rain fell. A neighbour told us the wet was coming, batten down. We watched storms approach, light muted and grainy.

You said plans were more useless than superannuation. Hopeless as 7am to 7pm jobs, mortgages, child bearing hips and a credit rating. That was all about the future. Who could see a future while the world collapsed? Future didn't extend beyond the next kilometre of road or tomorrow's meals. I'd looked up that road as you spoke, mirages rippling in distance. I went to ask about where home would be when this was over and what then. But I stayed silent. You'd given up on futures after all.

You took up smoking. It changed how you smelt. It replaced your mornings of peppermint toothpaste and afternoons of salt. You joked it stopped you swallowing mosquitoes. You kissed me, your chapped lips like paper cuts.

The café opposite the caravan park taped a position vacant sign on the door. It dangled crookedly, a corner fluttering every time the door opened. I enquired. The blackboard listed milkshakes, beef and red wine pies, toasted sandwiches with double cheese and ice creams. Two petrol bowsers stood out the front.

"Kitchen hand work," the owner said. "Plus taking readings off the petrol bowsers. Receiving orders, processing payments. Washing floors when kids are car sick. Stacking stock. Cooking burgers after you've been trained. Being nice to people driving home to another year of boring jobs." He stepped back and appraised me. "Do you have any clean shirts? Give that beard a trim?"

Lightning twitched at night. Thunder turned along horizons. Channelled along my bones. Humidity dragged at us like undertow. Our neighbour handed us three day old newspapers. Last year the fifth hottest ever recorded you read to me. Pacific islands inundated by rising seas. Land fill space running out. Old Beatles footage found. Your father used to own all their recordings you said. When he died your brother helped himself to the stacked vinyl records. Another reason not to believe in anything you quipped. Imagine your own flesh and blood stealing from you.

They provided an apron and gloves. I sliced lettuce into strips, sawed into over ripe tomatoes. Sprayed insect killer into spaces behind the vats and refrigerator. Topped up the ice block freezer.

“Where you headed?” I asked drivers.

“Cairns then a ferry to Thursday Island,” one said. “Anywhere the fishing is good,” another explained. “Why?” a woman who never looked at me asked.

The café was run by a couple. They barely spoke to each other but seemed in touch through a language of eye movements and routines set as dance steps. They lived in a shack behind the shop. Once they sent me back there to look for a notepad. Pictures of their children lined a wall, smiling but in a way where it didn’t reach their eyes.

“Can you slice that quiche?” the woman asked. “Make sure each piece is exactly the same size.”

Afterwards I told you about my day. Right down to the condensation on lettuce and paper wasps hovering near the back door. About the Japanese tourist bus with people stepping off pushing up umbrellas under the burning sun. That the café owners showed me how to toss a burger and the woman said it was artistry. Then the man said he could feel rain coming. Approaching storms ached in his old football injuries. I laughed when I wasn’t meant to. You sat on the step, smoking and barefoot, listening but maybe not. I asked what you’d been doing. You said you’d been wondering how far to the Gulf of Carpentaria and what was beyond that. What was out past the ocean with its blue green furrows sweeping in?

That night rain hammered. I saw you singing softly in the gloom, stubbing out a cigarette with smoke that stuck to my sweat like glaze. Long curtains of rain fell off the roof. Damp mist seeped in from a hole I never found, layering over us. In the morning I stared at your bare limbs, sheets kicked off, your body stretched and deeply brown, hands flung above your head. And the shadows in your face, as if some parts of you were more alive than others. Casuarina trees dripped onto the roof. Walls ticked in the swelling heat. I dressed, shirt already sticking to my back. On the road dead cane toads scattered. Patterns of tyre tread squished through them. Others bloated, covered in green flies. More lay already leathery from roasting in the sun.

“It rained the bastards,” the owner said to me, passing an apron. “You didn’t hear them? Up the coast the storm front picked them up when blowing through. Peeled them off the ground like they were chip bags. Started falling from the sky down the road. Few lizards too. Probably lucky didn’t get a hitch hiker crashing through our window. Rained cane toads right

through here. Have to climb the ladder and hose their guts off the roof before they begin stinking.”

I started cooking the first hamburgers. Geometry as well as artistry. Circumference of meat patties fitting the circles of buns. Corners of gently melted cheese protruding from the burger. Two rings of tomatoes with taste left behind in a cool room looping on top. People came and went. A German tourist left a half-eaten burger on one of the plastic tables.

“This meat is so pink it could be alive enough to teach circus tricks to!” the owner said. He peeled back the leftover burger insides as if standing over an autopsy. “That isn’t cooked. It could be put on a leash and taken for a walk. Audrey! Come out here!”

I hadn’t realised her name was Audrey. Or anything. She brushed through the fly strips, looking at me. Her skin mottled pink and brown from too many sunburns.

He said I couldn’t keep working there. I’d poison someone cooking like that. He held up the patty to Audrey and a shape of pink meat drooped in his hand. He shook his head.

“Wait there. Give me your apron,” he said. “How many hours you work today? Here’s \$28. Make it \$30. Don’t ever come back. Even to buy petrol.” I looked desperately at Audrey. She squeezed eyes shut, inhaling unevenly.

“Just go,” she said quietly. “I wish I could.”

I explained everything that happened and you nodded lethargically. I felt humidity rising in my skin. You said you weren’t surprised. Employment was like that. Job ads should say responsibilities included being taken advantage of, feeling bored and someone talking down to you. I said I wanted to go home. There was nothing past the next town except bingo nights and haze from burning cane fields thick as smoking a roll your own. You said no. Going back meant suburbs. Living meekly. I told you the world needed your activism. Make your anger soar. March, contact people, fund raise, sign petitions. You looked impatiently at me as if I was a child attempting adult conversation.

During evening I stirred vegetables through rice. Heat lifted from a gas jet. We ate outside, lighting cracking, illuminating us bloodless, like corpses. You asked if I wanted children. And if so, what did I feel so optimistic about that enabled me to believe they would be safe from the world’s mounting horrors? Kids have closer relationships with mobile phones than parents. Did I want everything else in that life? A \$3000 monthly mortgage and no goals beyond spending weekends catching up on sleep and standing in supermarket queues? I ate in silence.

I barely heard the knocking. The caravan filled with morning light. Yanked the sheet up so it billowed over you, drooping into your undulations. I grinded open the door. The site manager nodded at me. Looked past at plastic plates piled in a drying rack and mildew spotting walls. Remarked it'd been the hottest wet season he'd experienced. His eyes swung towards the sound of your breathing.

“Those storms, apart from dropping a few thousand cane toads, washed away part of the cliff.” He looked into my eyes as if hoping I might finish his sentence. “It's not safe here anymore. State park people closing it down. They reckon the place could start tipping into the sea. Climate's gone crazy, I tell you.” He turned, beginning to walk away. “Mango season in April if you're looking for work then.”

I lay next to you. Leaned on elbows to study your face. Your shadows had changed, moving the way high and low pressure troughs cross maps. Green veins lined under your arms. I kissed the salt of your chest. You didn't move. I stepped outside into gusting sea breeze. Three caravans up a couple packed. Fishing rods strapped to the top of a jeep.

I cooked you eggs. Angled my body away from the spitting pin pricks of boiling fat. Eased the eggs onto buttered bread. You sat at the table, pushing the fringe from your eyes. You told me the life I'd spoken about returning to offered you the same emptiness as when people talked about believing in religion. You touched my face, stroking with fingertips before cupping my cheeks in your hands. You said quietly what I wanted seemed like a dying language. That one day what I now spoke of going back to would no longer exist in living memory, the way old wisdoms of growing vegetables, sewing, which winds bring rain and kneading pasta would disappear. That night you pulled a singlet top over your head and your hair dragged up and toppled down. You nestled into me so that I absorbed your warmth and heartbeats.

I rolled into the bunched sheets and drifts of your body heat. Cool air filled the spaces left behind by humidity. I sat up, the mattress giving slightly under me. You'd gone. The caravan empty, no longer seething with your despair or passion. I followed your footprints in wet soil outside the door, high arches of your feet angling towards the highway. Even asked the site manager if he'd seen you. Did you depart on a bus or ask for a ride with someone else leaving? The manager shook his head, telling me he'd been watching greyhound racing so closely he wouldn't notice a tsunami arriving. I dragged my feet back to the van, opening the door so your smells and shadows wisped over me. Hauled up my bag and slid it into the car.

The car engine stuttered and I eased forward, yanking the steering wheel away from potholes filled with black water. The site manager waved half-heartedly as I passed. At the highway I stopped, looking towards where the road faced north like a line marking longitude and how it curved south. I waited a long time, motor idling, not knowing what to do and wanting to tell you that.