

Eleanor

Present (1973)

STAND. WALK. AND she does, moves down the hall to their bedroom, and when she's by his side, Eleanor leans into her husband's mouth, waits for warm breath on lips. Breasts are full; the warm drip of herself down her stomach, down between her legs. There is no way to stop the flow of yourself once the body accepts release.

Eleanor quiets to the bathroom, switches the light on, lifts her top, wipes herself clean: right breast and stomach and water between her legs gives her the urge to urinate and so she does, a slight sting from having held on overnight.

All quiet in the house, all quiet in the blue hour. Move quicker, Eleanor.

She heads back down the hallway, opens the door to her daughter, the blue lava lamp in shadow play on walls. Eleanor goes to the cot, scoops up Amy, scoops up blankets, and the sight of her daughter's mouth brings a drop of milk, the way all feeds do. Eleanor, leave now so you can get to safety before nightfall, and she whispers, 'Everything will be better soon, Amy.'

There in the first yawn of daylight: dishes stacked by the sink, pumpkin soup splatter on the wall near the telephone, broken chips of the earthenware bowls from Kitty. Mother's wedding gifts. There: a baby rattle in the middle of the lounge room floor, an open cupboard door. Last night's leftovers, never tidied.

Things are the same until you're not, she thinks.

Eleanor feels her way along the walls, navigates past dining chairs, through the obstacle course of day-in-day-out. The smear of dried pumpkin soup on the wall, the phone cord, cold wallpaper, the humming fridge. Open it, Eleanor, and she does, lights up the room with artificial light. Be quiet. On the kitchen counter: her husband's black box, brought home from Vietnam. She holds Amy closer, kisses and kisses.

Artificial light allows you to see what you want to see and so she sees a home filled with the passion of a husband and wife, of two people magnetised hip to hip, moving a body as one through the night, the way they tell each other things that only make sense when whispered in an ear, at just that sonic frequency. Like birds, like whale song: language of like-like species; the taxonomy of family. There: George standing in the lounge room holding his granddaughter Amy, his smile gate-wide, speaking about how in

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the summer they will camp up at the blue mountain just like old times. There: Kitty laughing along to a story Eleanor has told her. There: Badger with his children.

But there is no existence like this. Out the front door into darkness: colder than she expects. She wraps the blanket tighter around Amy, keeps her warm. A streetlight glows fog from the opposite side of the street and in the distance is a car, another car, rolling towards early-morning shift work. Down the front steps: flowers graze her calves and she is at the gas meter in the front yard, the small ticking like night crickets hiding in grass. Letterboxes rise like field mushrooms, grey in the streetlight. Up above: powerful owl sound, the skitch of a possum running overhead on the electric wire. A goat hangs from the Burgesses' porch, night dew fur, swings in time with tree movement. The smell of the goat. The last hunt was two days ago. There is no disguising death. It sticks to skin, sticks to clothing, sticks to memory. Often you have to look past it to keep going on with life, on with the day. She sniffs her skin, her jumper, hopes the winter air will take away the smell.

Eleanor carries her daughter to the midnight blue 1968 Belmont station wagon filled with a few of their belongings, the emergency items they will need for their journey, straps Amy into the back seat. 'I'm just going to do one last thing.' She kisses her daughter, goes back into the house.

Inside, she leans against the closed bedroom door; uses wood for a spine. Listens. She opens the door, holds her breath, and he's limbed out like a tree, the giant way he takes up space. I just need to make sure he's not awake. Everything is quiet and her

heart races to her throat. Eleanor, leave. It's time to leave, he will wake any minute.

She closes the door and rushes to the kitchen, snatches the black box off the counter, runs out of the house to her daughter.

Automatic pulses push Eleanor through Wintonvale streets, car tyres smooth on tar. Ahead of her a crow scamps around the base of a tree and wind sweeps through feathers; a black sea. Eleanor and her birds: makes her smile. Wind swims hair, messes into face and eyes. She smooths her hair away so she can see, winds the window up, blasts the car with heat. It's always so cold everywhere. Eleanor reaches over the driver seat to Amy, palms her daughter's pudgy legs. 'Are you ready for a long drive, bub?' The journey to the blue mountain will take a while.

Outside the car: houses beam light; people fetch newspapers from yards, burrow down into neighbour talk.

Inside the car: a small piece of lapis on a thin strip of leather swings from the rear-view mirror. Kitty had given it to Eleanor, an unexpected gift she's never been able to bring herself to get rid of.

Eleanor, tell your daughter a story to keep yourself awake. And, an eye on lapis, she does, says, 'Did you know the sky is blue but once, a long time ago, humans didn't have a word for such a colour? Blue isn't as common in nature as you would think. In old books the sky is described as apocalyptic blazes of purple, something to fear. Those people didn't realise how many ways a human eye could detect shades of blue and so they didn't always know what colour they were looking at. Isn't that amazing, Amy?'

The idea of it makes Eleanor cry. Stop it.

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‘Amy, wouldn’t it be wonderful to see something that’s rarer than blue?’ And she watches the lapis swing, thinks of the blue mountain, her favourite place. ‘We’re going somewhere we will be safe. We never have to come back here.’ Her foot on the accelerator takes them out of Wintonvale, takes them towards the highway to the mountain. She eyes the rear-view mirror, keeps a lookout for headlights, keeps a lookout for him.