

‘Nice part of town,’ the taxi driver said, as soon as I gave him the address. I couldn’t read the tone in his voice – envy, rue, contempt. Perhaps all three.

We began the long ascent of the mountain. I craned my neck to look at the city beneath us. I could see where I had come from now, the wide-mouthed harbour flanked by half-finished highways. This was where I’d been marooned for days. Some of the overhead flyways simply stopped abruptly halfway along the roadway, like the highest platform in a diving pool. From up here the gigantic Chinese container ships and oil rigs looked so much smaller. I allowed my eye to skate over the ship, but even so my heart lurched as its green hull flashed at me in the mid-day sun.

We kept ascending, so quickly my ears popped. I could smell jasmine and frangipani through the car windows. We wound through tree-darkened avenues. The houses expanded with each metre climbed until they were full-blown palaces. Finally the taxi delivered me to a sandstone-coloured structure perched on the side of the mountain. It looked like a house you might find in a Dutch village, adapted for life in the subtropics.

‘I didn’t know it was possible to live this far up,’ I said to the taxi driver.

‘It is if you’ve got enough money.’

I buzzed the gate and spoke to a woman’s voice – Sara, I supposed. The gate slid open and we glided up the drive, so

steep it felt like being in a funicular. Stout plants clambered over the terraced levels on either side of the driveway; they were spiky and bulbous at the same time, with avid, rubbery leaves.

A blond woman with jade green eyes descended the steps to the house. She seemed to float; her sense of ownership was that complete. She was long-legged, dressed in white trousers and a sand-coloured blouse.

‘Pieter is out running,’ Sara said, as she gave me her hand. ‘He’s training for the marathon.’

‘Oh.’ I nearly said, *but I thought he was a writer*. I’d never pictured a writer running a marathon.

‘Come in, let me get you some coffee.’

I dropped my bags. I saw her eye glance at them nervously, as if I had brought dogs and not luggage. She motioned for me to sit in the living room.

When I entered the room I couldn’t help but stop and stand stock-still. My jaw may even have fallen open.

‘Quite the view, isn’t it?’ Her voice, the cool neutrality of it, told me that many a guest had been similarly stopped in their tracks.

The wide arc of the bay was stretched out before us. In the distance was the low, whale-like back of Garzia Island, which even with my slim knowledge of the city I knew was a former penal colony from when the Portuguese were still loitering on this promontory of the planet, hoping for lucre.

To the right of Garzia Island were blonde hills which gleamed like flax in the sun. The mountain with its strenuous flattened peak filled an entire window. The living room was glass on two sides. The thought entered and exited my mind, too fleeting to matter. People in glass houses.

Sara went to the kitchen. Later she would tell me she asked me to sit down three times that morning but as soon as I sat I stood up again.

I could not tear my eyes away from the mountain. The jagged peak that marked one undulation of its range soared

into the sky, piercing a hole in it. Next to the house a date palm towered, its trunk of scaled chocolate bark perfectly offsetting the dark shale of the mountain. Straight ahead was the ocean; off to one side was the harbour, half-hidden behind a headland. My eye rested on it again for a second. The ship, patiently waiting alongside the quay.

I reminded myself it was Saturday. Tomorrow the ship will leave.

‘So,’ Sara began, when she finally got me off my feet. ‘How long are you here for?’

‘I’m not sure. I – I’ve just had a change of plan.’

She nodded, calmly. If she had been English, alarm bells would already have been sounding in her mind: How long will I be stuck with this person? Why does he have so much baggage? Why has a random contact of our niece ended up on our doorstep?

‘Well this is as good a place as any to have your plans change.’ She smiled easily, warmly, I thought. ‘You can certainly stay here as long as you like. We’ve got no one coming until April.’

It was mid-December. ‘It shouldn’t be that long, at least I hope not,’ I said. ‘I’ll just make some arrangements for my trip home, and then let you know.’

‘That’s absolutely fine. It’s a pleasure to have a friend of Ruth’s here.’ Her delivery was unruffled, flawless.

I accepted Sara’s invitation to join her on a walk on the mountain behind the house. She met me at the bottom of the steps. She’d changed into trim shorts. She must have been in her late fifties or early sixties but her legs were perfect; there was nothing of the tell-tale bulge of skin at the knees, or those black spidering veins. I stared long enough for her to take my amazement as a compliment, perhaps, because she gave a sudden smile.

We started down the road, which soon ended in a paved cul-de-sac. From it a path led into a sparse forest. It was dry as tinder in areas, the ground parched and weedy. All

the trees and flowers we passed were unfamiliar – thick, bulbous flowers. They looked water-hungry but somehow thrived in the seasonally dry climate.

We came to a fissure in the mountain. The sound of water cascading came to meet us. The trees parted to reveal a narrow stream.

‘Slaves would come here to wash clothes,’ Sara said. Her voice was complex – rich, melodic, but with a tinge of darkness to it, or perhaps this saturnine note was code for her disapproval of the city’s history.

I looked up, trying to find the mountain’s summit among clouds. I could feel it, somehow, that this shaded bower had once been a place of hardship. Alongside the river were stone steps, knee-worn through hundreds of years of prostrations, and beside them, flat, table-like washing rocks. I could see the interlacing strata of grey mudstone and sandstone, its outer shield dark shale. Then layers of granite: feldspar, quartz, black mica, all glittering in the strange bright light.

Sara smiled. ‘You seem transfixed.’

‘By the mountain? I guess so. I used to be a geologist.’

‘But now you work for a humanitarian relief organisation. How does that fit in?’

I was used to this comment. I can’t work you out, people – colleagues, my line manager, strangers met on planes, would say.

‘It’s complicated.’ I offered an apologetic smile.

‘Everything’s complicated.’ Her laugh was itself complex, rueful, rise-above-it-all. ‘Pieter should be back about lunch-time. He’ll need to take a shower and wind down.’

‘Does he often train for marathons?’

‘Oh yes, and cycle races, triathlons, endurance contests. Everyone does that here.’

By everyone she couldn’t have meant the squatter camps I’d seen on the way in from the airport, their faded tutti-frutti shacks, people inside broiled alive by tin roofs in the

summer and congealed in winter. They were enrolled in a different endurance contest.

We arrived back at the house. Sara showed me to their guest flat, which was self-contained but attached to the main house through an internal door. She told me they had designed and built the flat themselves, and that she used to see her clients there while Pieter worked in his basement office.

By then the sun parried the swift ocean clouds for position and shone through, the light bright, carrying within it the promise of a humid heat, should the clouds dissolve. I stood in the light for a minute as Sara undid the three locks and de-activated the house alarm. I registered what was about to happen to me. For a moment, I thought I would be alright. But I could only watch helplessly as the air gathered itself into blackberries, then went dark.

‘We thought we’d lost you there.’

It felt like I was lying on concrete. I realised I was. I sat up.

‘Hey, take it easy.’

I opened my eyes into the face of a blond-haired man. He was crouching on one knee. His fingers were wrapped around my wrist. He might be a doctor. There was a clinical glint in his gaze. His voice was familiar, somehow, although I’d never seen him before.

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about. We’d like you to lie down inside, though. You might find that more comfortable.’

‘I haven’t been sleeping well,’ I said, as the man helped me to my feet. ‘I haven’t been eating either.’

‘Not sleeping and not eating, hey?’ His tone was avuncular, but suspicious.

‘I’ve been under a lot of stress – at home.’

‘That’s fine, Nick, don’t worry,’ Sara’s voice came from somewhere behind me. ‘We just want to make sure you’re alright. You fainted stone dead, there.’

I realised the man was Pieter. ‘We’re going to put you in bed and then we’ll call Marina, our doctor.’

‘No!’ I nearly shouted. ‘I mean, I don’t want to put you to any trouble. Please don’t make a fuss. It’s just dehydration. I’ll take a couple of salt sachets. I’m not concussed. I’ll be fine.’

They looked at me in tandem, a double-headed puppet of concern, the same kind-but-wary expressions on their tanned, shining faces. *They don’t know you from Adam*, I told myself. *You have to reassure them.*

‘I’ve had some difficult decisions to make recently, and it’s left me very strung out. But I’m fine, now.’

Sara gave me the sturdy, professional look psychiatrists likely turn on liars.

‘Okay, Nick. But take those salts and get some sleep. We’ll check on you in a few hours.’

When I woke it was late afternoon. My bedroom had a patio door. I opened it and was confronted with a garden, two chairs, and the same panoramic view of the harbour and mountain, although the majestic sweep I’d admired in the living room was curtailed by the curve of the house.

The light lay in gold ribbons on the flanks of the mountain. A heat haze had settled over the harbour, blurring the outlines of supertankers. My eye scurried over the quay where the ship was moored but not before I’d seen that it was still there.

I resolved to tell Pieter and Sara the truth, of my fainting spell, why I was here, why I had no idea how long I would stay. They had been kind to me, they deserved to know.

Pieter appeared from around a corner. He wore a crisp white shirt tucked into jeans and a leather belt. He was barefoot and his hair was plastered to his head from his shower. He was very thin – one of those men who are naturally so. You could see the architecture of the bones and muscles in his face.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Much better.’

‘You haven’t got a headache?’

‘No, nothing like that. No concussion.’

‘That’s good. I had one once. I came off my bike, just up there, on the mountain.’

This was the moment in which I would say, Look, I’ve just made this crazy decision I don’t understand. I’m not supposed to be here, but I’ve got nowhere to go.

We turned our faces in tandem, like sunflowers, toward the setting sun.

‘This time of year the sun rises in the sea and sets behind the mountain – we get light all day,’ Pieter said. ‘The people who live on the other side are spared the wind but they get far less light.’

My confession unravelled itself, or it abandoned me, or I let it be carried away by the moment. I had so little experience with secrets, guilty or otherwise. I’d never liked them; a secret was a dripping overheated greenhouse.

‘I’ve never been anywhere the wind is so fierce in the summer,’ I said.

‘Not like that in England, is it?’

A dog appeared, a mongrel, or a cross, a bullish dog with a bruiser’s face.

‘Hello, Lucy.’ He turned to me and grinned. ‘The name doesn’t really fit the face, does it. But she’s a sweetheart. Arr! Grrr!’ He planted his legs wide apart, a position of mock threat. Lucy went wild with pleasure, charging away, thrilled, then turning on a dime to come back to face the monster.

Behind Pieter I saw a bright light that seemed to zing from inside him in a perfect giant Z, a flash of miniature lightning.

‘What was that?’

‘Transformer.’ Pieter pointed to a sizzling cylinder nestling in a telegraph pole halfway down the road. ‘They often explode – too much load on the system. Don’t be alarmed if the electricity cuts out. We have candles.’

He turned back to the dog, who rushed at him, growling,

purple gums bared. For a moment I thought she would bite. But she stuck her head between his calves and squealed with delight.

‘We have rolling electricity cuts, this time of year,’ he went on. ‘They announce them in the paper, supposedly, but it can cut out any time.’

‘Are there shortages?’

‘Ah, if only it were that easy. No, it’s corruption, mis-management. A new government is about to be elected, although we’re in a one-party state, effectively. It makes you appreciate how useful it is to have two political parties contesting each other, however bad either of them will be. At least it bestows symmetry if not a chance for historical dialectic.’

His speech reminded me of the policy analysts in our office in London. I wasn’t used to athletic, vital men who were also intellectuals, if that’s what Pieter was. I lived in a country where a certain kind of man got things done, and a certain kind of man thought about things. Perhaps here they could be one and the same.

‘It’s not only power, but other infrastructure.’ He pointed into the harbour. Along its perimeter, an eight-lane highway conveyed sun-glinted cars into the interior like platelets rushing down an artery. Pieter told me that the diving board freeways I’d seen on my way in had been built in a spasm of economic optimism, which had just expired.

‘You *are* English, aren’t you?’ he peered at me.

‘The way you say it, it’s not a good thing to be.’

‘Well, it might not be, you know. The English don’t have a good reputation in this country. They quashed the independence movement, then established a colonial system that set the country back a hundred years.’

‘I am,’ I conceded. ‘But I don’t feel very English. I was brought up all over the place – South America, Canada, the Caribbean.’

‘Was your father a diplomat?’

‘My mother, actually.’

‘Ah,’ Pieter gave a thin smile. ‘I fell into that trap didn’t I? Sorry. You know, you don’t look English either. You’re too dark. In fact you don’t look anything.’ He smiled. If I had known him better then I would have said I always felt like someone drawn in pencil. A child’s drawing of a man, maybe. Anyone could take an eraser and rub me out.

‘I’m impressed you still have the energy to play with the dog,’ I said. ‘After all that running.’

Sara answered for him. She emerged from the patio into the full sun, her hair gleaming. ‘Pieter’s got amazing energy. You’ll see.’

I turned to face Sara. ‘It must be so gruelling.’

‘Yes, it is sometimes.’ Sara smiled.

‘No, I didn’t mean... I meant the training.’

Sara only laughed. ‘Get some sleep, Nick. And don’t forget to rehydrate.’

There was something jarring in her voice, not dismissive but rather ironic, as if they still did not believe my story. I turned to look into her eyes. The note in her gaze was evaluative – masculine, I would have said until recently, but I realise now that this is a shorthand for something intangible I associate with men: a streamlining of judgement, an absence of empathy, or perhaps better said, a professionalisation of it. Or maybe just something withheld.

I went to bed in their granny flat. Despite my fatigue I could not get to sleep for a long time. I listened to the night wind, which sliced sideways along the garden. Through a fissure in the curtain I saw the lights of the city stretched around the bay, a semi-circle of distant flickering candles.

I found myself thinking of Sara, of her contained quality. Her jade eyes and heart-shaped face. She was a professional, well-to-do, elegant woman who drove a Mercedes, but I had a sense this version of her was a decoy.

As I fell asleep that night in my new bed I thought, these are the strangest days I have lived in years, possibly in my

whole life. Here I am, in the house filled with people I don't know, in a city where I never expected to spend more than a few days, telling lies, or no, that's not quite right: not telling the truth. Why then do I feel such serenity, as if I have come home?