AN UNKNOWN SKY

AND OTHER STORIES

SUSAN MIDALIA

UWA PUBLISHING
To my brother
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(1948–2011)
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She knew it would be the middle of summer, but Russia was meant to be swirling snow, luxurious furs, huddling by a fire with smoky tea drawn from a gleaming samovar. Even the forecast she’d read at home, thirty degrees and humid, had failed to convince her; she’d packed three jumpers, several pairs of thick trousers, five pairs of fleecy socks. Even a hot-water bottle. When she finally arrived in Moscow and stepped off the plane, the heat rushed maliciously towards her. And then the stifling terminal, packed tight with prowling men straight out of gangster movies, and busty young women with peroxide hair and 80s platform shoes. There was concrete everywhere and not a word of English on the multitude of signs. Sixteen sleepless hours in the air to get here, and a four-hour wait in Dubai, where oversized westerners had swarmed along rows of duty-free whisky, perfume, diamonds. Petra had sat in a cafe and watched them, these waddling lords of the earth in their logo-ed shirts. Now they waited with her in the terminal, their faces unsure, uneasy, in the crowd.

Underground
The immigration official was a stout young blonde who wore gold braid on her shoulder pads, a red star on her cap and a brittle expression. Petra tried one of the few Russian words she’d been able to learn, such a useful word: zdravstvooytee, hello, in what she hoped was a friendly tone. But she made a point of looking blank, remembering the advice of her translator friend Sophia. Don’t smile. Muscovites think you’re simple, you know, a little retarded, if you smile at them. Petra handed over her passport, the official letter of introduction and the obligatory confirmation of hotel bookings for every day of her visit. Her holiday with a difference. The official stared at her, unblinking, and then looked down at her papers, up again at her face, down again, up again, wordless and stiff. As if I’m a criminal, thought Petra. The woman glared as though she could see right through her, held up a rubber stamp for ten, fifteen seconds, and then thumped it down on the passport. Petra felt her legs untighten. Ah, welcome to Moscow, she thought: mindless bureaucracy, state-sanctioned surliness; two cultural stereotypes before she’d even left the airport. Four if you counted the gangster men and the vaguely whorish girls. It was a relief to be dismissed with a toss of the head and a parting glance of official contempt.

Finding the commuter train wasn’t any easier. There were forests of arrows on every wall, indecipherable signs. Petra remembered the word for train, poheest, two simple syllables, but people barged past her or shrugged their shoulders when she asked the way. Sophia had warned her about this as well: notoriously unhelpful, deliberately obstructionist at times. They don’t care about our tourist dollars. They get plenty of tourists from the provinces, and they’ve got a hell of a lot of oil. Petra’s suitcase felt suddenly heavy, despite its sturdy wheels, and she gave
herself up to the surge of the crowd, let herself be pushed through a turnstile and hoped for the best. And there it was: a platform, open space, blue sky, a gaggle of English speakers looking startled by their good luck. An overdressed middle-aged couple began consulting a map and quarrelling; and further along, two red-faced, swaggering young men, loudly desperate for a beer. Petra cringed, her eyes fixed on the ground. I won’t say a word, she thought. I’ll be silent, unfriendly, un-Australian. She waited until they’d hauled their luggage up the steps of the train and chose a compartment further down the line.

Seated inside, so weary now, she felt weighed down by the grinding of the engine, the guttural words of passengers, an overhead TV displaying Gucci, Armani, Dolce&Gabbana. Through the window Petra glimpsed brutal, decaying high-rise apartments and then, unexpectedly, flashes of leafy, graceful trees streaked by the afternoon sun. Were they elms or poplars? Silver birch? She’d never been good with nature. It could easily have been England, where she’d lived for a year, half a lifetime ago. She let herself blur with the passing of the trees, remembering the green and pleasant land where she’d backpacked and worked and fallen in love, where she’d cried at the airport when it was time to go home, cried in the plane for hours. She’d been clinging and desperate, a chain-smoking wreck; he’d looked relieved to see her go. *I know we’ll meet again*, he’d said, like a character in an old war movie, trying to be kind, with the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. They hadn’t been in touch for years and, of course, they’d never met again.

The train braked and sent her lurching into the seat in front. She was aware of a man staring at her, his eyes slitted,
and she clutched her handbag more tightly to her chest. She reached her hotel in a daze of traffic and taxi-driver shouts, registered at reception with surprising ease, hardly saw her threadbare room or felt the baking, stuffy heat as she levered off her shoes and slumped down on the single bed. She was asleep in less than a minute.

What would she write to those back home? Three days in Moscow and an email was due, one of those generic travellers’ tales she’d become quite skilled at devising. The sights, naturally, in some detail; the food, the weather; a witticism or two; perhaps a bad translation for the benefit of literary friends. Like the sign in the hotel bathroom, exhorting guests not to steal the towels: EARNEST REQUEST written in bold capital letters. People seemed to like her emails: interesting, amusing, they said, although she preferred writing postcards, enjoyed selecting images for particular friends. Postcards are for old ladies, her niece had declared, and then blushed with what might have been contrition. So Petra would be electronic, would comment on the food – rather too salty and potatoes with everything – and mention her health for the sake of her elderly mother, say she was fine, walked everywhere briskly. Anything to avoid the underground, despite what her nephew had told her. They’ve got marble floors and whopping great statues of the workers! Stained glass windows and massive chandeliers, you have to see it, Aunty Pet! But she would not see it, none of it at all. In her youth she’d gone down into the London Underground, down and further down, enclosed and panicked by concrete walls. Unable to breathe amongst
the jostling and prodding, the press of sweating humanity, she’d fled from the station in shame. And those were the days of the IRA, bomb scares and real bombs; urgent, abrasive sirens. She’d tried again to take the Tube but had stood on the platform, unable to board a crowded train, crying like a fool. A woman had stopped to ask if she could help and Petra had said, stupidly, *I’m Australian*. Now, here in Moscow, she felt the trains shuddering beneath her, imagined the long, steep escalators crawling slowly down into the earth.

But she would try to describe the city for her nephew. Matty was her favourite, a history boy, fifteen, her sister’s youngest. Smart, restless, *dying to see the world*, he said. No one in his family had ever travelled further than Bali (twice), and when Petra told him of her trip to Russia, he’d taken books from the library and shown her what he’d found. Moscow razed to the ground to defeat Napoleon’s army and then rebuilt, *a stricken giant resurrected*. St Petersburg, a miracle built on water and, according to legend, constructed in the sky by Peter the Great and then lowered like a giant model onto the ground.

In the airport cafe, Matty had sat slumped and dejected, kicking one sneakered foot against a chair until his mother had snapped at him to stop. He’d finally voiced his longing, how all his life he’d wanted to see Lenin’s tomb. *He’s decomposing, Aunty Pet*, he’d explained, leaning forward on the table. *In a few years’ time he won’t be there at all*. He’d ignored his sister’s shrieks and his mother’s look of alarm. *He changed the course of history and you can see him, in the flesh. How amazing is that?* Before she knew what she was saying, Petra had made an arrangement: *I’ll go and see Mr Lenin, and if he’s still there in two years’ time, I’ll take you to see him for yourself*. Her sister
had looked even more alarmed and Petra had smiled, the extravagant spinster sibling, the self-indulgent maiden aunt, who’d taken early retirement as a teacher and decided to see the world. She’d gone at two-year intervals to the predictable destinations – Paris, Florence, Rome, each time with a different friend – and had found each journey instructive (she had photographs to prove this). But no one had wanted to travel to Russia: it was, apparently, too dangerous, and none of her friends could see the attraction. Petra had found it difficult to explain. Russian novels and the movie of Dr Zhivago (all that swirling snow); a long-ago lover with stories of imperial treasures; some unformed, melancholy sense of a suffering history. At the airport, she’d clasped Matty’s hand. I promise, she’d said, knowing her sister thought she was mad, knowing that was part of the pleasure.

The hotel’s internet cafe was full of high-spirited backpackers who glanced briefly at her too-youthful summer dress (yesterday’s purchase in the searing heat). And then she was invisible, free to compose her news. The days had been very hot, she wrote: diminutive Japanese tourists sheltering from the sun under bright umbrellas; pretty young women sweltering in stockings and lace. Her hotel room was adequate, and served up ancient episodes of Skippy, ludicrously dubbed, on Russian TV. The ubiquitous babushka dolls were, well, ubiquitous. And no, there were no cunning pickpockets or Russian mafia on the streets. The only sign of organised crime was the McDonald’s near Red Square, which charged exorbitant prices for indigestible food. She’d queued for hours to see the Armoury: the coronation robes and thrones, studded with turquoise, rubies, pearls, lapis lazuli, were marvels of excess, but the Fabergé eggs she’d found rather
crass. The jewel-encrusted wheels of the imperial carriages could have fed a million serfs. The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts was, unfortunately, closed. Churches everywhere were being restored as part of a religious revival, and she’d never seen so many crucifixes in so many conspicuous cleavages. She’d lingered in a bookshop to watch a man talking to a group of eager listeners. He was tall, with endearing pixie ears, and had his audience eating out of his gesticulating hands. They laughed, applauded, laughed some more; one man even toppled sideways in his chair. Petra thought the pixie man must have been a comic writer, or at least an amusing speaker, but either way she had understood nothing, not a word. As she recalled it now, she remembered how this had pained her, how she’d felt like an imposter. A fraud.

And she had to confess that in the brightness of daylight, Red Square had felt curiously blank. She’d tried to picture it – the tsar and his milling, worshipping subjects; the famous military parades; the jubilant workers’ rallies; even, as her niece had enthused, the thousands who’d cheered Paul McCartney and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. But she saw only endless, dull paving bricks, tourists being posed for photos – the provocative minx, the squirming toddler, the scowling son – and, flanking one side, the world’s largest shopping centre, smoothly marbled, blandly bourgeois: GUM, pronounced Goom, as in book. St Basil’s Cathedral was an architect’s bad joke, its psychedelic onion domes like something out of Disneyland. And no (remembering Matty’s plea), she hadn’t yet been to see Lenin’s tomb, guarded by impossibly handsome young men, all high cheekbones and military bearing, in sleek dark uniforms. But she had promised him; she would go tomorrow, on her last day in
Moscow. As she sent off her email, she had an image of her nephew, long-haired, curious, excited, sitting opposite her at breakfast. They would puzzle over the menu and plan the day’s itinerary; study brochures and maps. It pleased her to imagine such things.

After another hotel dinner of borscht and dumplings (she’d always been unadventurous with food, indeed took little interest), Petra retired to her room. She’d planned another evening walk in Red Square, where it stayed light until eleven, packed with desultory strollers, skipping children, entwined young lovers. She’d enjoyed her walk the night before, its aimlessness, the northern summer’s pearly sheen. Even the garish lights of GUM, a neon galleon sailing in a sea of happy crowds. Such endless light, such a radiant sky: here, for once, something, some marvellous trick of nature, had briefly met her vague desires. For as she brushed out her hair (looking rather lank, she saw in the mirror, in need of shampoo), Petra had to admit that Moscow had somehow failed her, had not lived up to her expectations, such as they were. She lay down on the bed, the hairbrush hanging loosely in her hand, too tired to meet the evening. Wondering why she had come here: this place whose history was mocked by American cafes and icons of Elvis Presley, where waiters ignored her and she couldn’t speak the language. Her feet ached from so much walking and her head was throbbing from too much sun. Petra felt weighed down, tiny as she was, a short, thin, insubstantial woman looking up at the ceiling, knowing she must get up in the morning, have breakfast and queue to see Lenin’s tomb. The forecast said thirty-four degrees and she would have to take the day more slowly, measure it out before boarding the overnight train to
St Petersburg, already booked, a first-class compartment. She thought of all this and wished she could stop thinking, could fall asleep, fully clothed, her face unwashed, unsoothed by her night cream, fast running out. She had to remember to use it sparingly; they didn’t seem to sell her brand in Moscow.

The queue for Lenin’s tomb was already long by 10 am. Petra was prepared: she’d had a nourishing, familiar cereal and orange juice for breakfast, put sunscreen on her face, neck, arms. But even though the summer crowds were down (the Global Financial Crisis), there were still plenty of tourists to annoy her, for that’s what she was feeling now – annoyed, irrationally so, she knew, for was she not one of them? Among all these people, impatient in the blistering sun amid the pushing and shoving and gabbling about stock-market losses, the mile-long queues and the latest cameras with automatic zooms (the ones they were forced to leave at some security point that no one had told them about), how they’d wasted an hour while foreigners barged in front of them until they got angry and barged right back. At least she didn’t carry on like this, at least she wasn’t an overstuffed pig drinking Coca-Cola and complaining, at least not out loud. Petra felt herself sighing and then moving forward as people elbowed her along, past the security screen, released at last from the crowd.

She wandered through the grounds of the mausoleum, looking at the granite busts of Soviet heroes. There were scores of them, and most she’d never heard of. Generals, her guidebook said, political leaders, astronauts, writers, their names carved in the Cyrillic she wouldn’t even try to translate. Somewhere, she knew, she would find the bust of Stalin, but what would it matter if she saw him or not: his
hawk-like eyes and imposing moustache, his dates of birth and death carved mightily in stone. To tell her friends, tell Matty, about the image of the brutal tyrant, to be able to say, she was there, she had seen it: all these unknown luminaries, the red carnations on the tombstones, the squealing teenage girls tottering on high heels, their disrespectful chewing of gum. She’d wanted to feel the grandeur of history, wasn’t that why she’d come here? To this place that everyone warned her would be difficult and dangerous, a silly old woman flaunting her rebellion, her fling with the mysteries of east-meets-west. For it was a fling, she saw it now. What did she think she was doing, standing in a mausoleum, surrounded by the faces of the glorious and infamous, feeling nothing more than irritation? She was no better than the silly girls, the moaning tourists. Miss Prissy High-and-Mighty. She’d been this way all her life, unable to feel what she wanted to feel, whatever you were meant to feel, that even now, especially now, eluded her. Oh, she had her friends, she loved reading, she’d had a decent career of sorts; and now her travels, belated, some kind of treat or reward for something; for endurance perhaps, when all was said and done. Her sister had admonished her: You should be more careful with your money. Petra had laughed. Don’t worry, she’d said, you won’t have to pay for my funeral.

She reached the black marble steps leading down to Lenin. She was here now; she should make the effort to see, even if it struck her, as it surely had her niece, as rather ghoulish, voyeuristic. V. I. Lenin, the man of letters he had called himself, and a man of the people, who had asked to be buried next to his mother. Even in death he had been cheated, thought Petra; revered, embalmed, preserved for posterity, opposite the modish merchandise of GUM. Stepping down,
grateful for the cool, the dark, the unusual silence, she drew in her breath. Around a corner it came into view: deep red drapes, a marble coffin, the body laid out, a ghostly, creamy face in profile. You were not allowed to stop, you had to keep walking in a mute semicircle, tourists in front of you, tourists behind, you had just enough time to catch a glimpse of the past.

As she came face to face with Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, she saw that one of his hands was clenched, the other loose, and that his face was small, rather dainty and oddly alive, his brow slightly furrowed. It made him look perplexed, as if his dying thought had been a quizzical question, some faint, persistent stirring of desire. Petra felt the hush of her surroundings, the cool of the room on her drying skin, and for just a moment, just the smallest rush of time, the circle of people dissolved around her, everything solid melted into air. She was utterly transfixed by the curled-up hand, the smooth, boyish complexion; the expression, above all the expression, of Lenin lost to some dream of history, even, perhaps, to himself.

Then it was over, and she was returned to the heat and light of the world, sensing the shudders of people sweeping past her, a teenage girl flapping: *gross me out, I'm never gunna look at a dead guy again*. Petra had to smile at this youthful conviction and the flailing girlish arms; at her own sombre, unexpected reflection; her moment of touristic grace. It had all happened in the blink of an eye, the flash of a camera if one had been permitted. Lenin was a dead guy and she needed to get out of the sun, and tonight she would board the train for St Petersburg, home of the world’s largest museum. The Hermitage, she’d read, housed so many objects that it would take ten years to merely glance at each one.
As she set off for the hotel, in need of water and rest, Petra thought once more of waxy Lenin, and wondered what her nephew would make of that questioning face. She could picture Matty’s own face, his blue-eyed brightness, as she asked him again to accompany her to Russia, to help her see the sights and to help her with the language, to walk down together to Lenin’s crowded tomb. *It’s an earnest request, Matty*, she would say, and they would laugh, already beginning to make their plans.
The boy with no ears

Amy was new and preferred keeping to herself. This wasn’t always easy, since her two housemates liked having lots of people around and because, she supposed, they were trying to be nice to her. The girl, Natalie – she’d said to call her Nat – was studying psychology and the boy, Jordan, was studying commerce. Amy had recently enrolled in education, and Nat called this refreshing.

Her housemates liked watching reality shows. Not long after Amy moved in, they urged her to watch The Biggest Loser, join them in throwing back their heads and laughing at the really fat people trying breathlessly, valiantly, to exercise. They kept saying things like they’re so gay, but Amy said nothing, because she wanted to keep her room. It was really cheap and close to uni, and she’d hated, yes hated, the college her parents had insisted she live in. It was full of girls who asked which school she’d been to and then didn’t ask her anything else, and who almost knocked her down on the stairwell. Boys who looked her up and down and then didn’t
look at her again. There was a boy on the floor above her who clomped all night in heavy boots and complained about the cooking in the student kitchen. *Bloody Asians and their smells*, he’d said, leaning against the door. The clatter in the dining hall and the banter she didn’t get, which the other kids from the country, who played football or netball, seemed to manage easily enough. And then Amy complained about a party in the room next to hers. It had gone on all night until she thought she’d go demented with all the thumping music, so she’d knocked and asked could they please be a bit quieter. The music had raged on, and in the morning she’d found a note under her door. *Sourpussy virgin, frigid bitch*, in bright green angry texta.

When Amy told her parents she wanted to move out, they didn’t understand. She told them about the noise and the drinking but they were still unconvinced. *There’s three meals on the table every day, and a laundry*, said her mum, and her dad spoke of *safety in numbers*. So Amy showed them the note, deeply embarrassed for both of them, for herself. They were horrified, and then they were helpful. Her dad demanded a refund from the college and gave them a piece of his mind as well, and her mum promised to bring fresh fruit and eggs when they came to visit from the country. They looked at ads for houses on the student noticeboard and insisted on going with her for the interview. Amy had seen Nat and Jordan trying not to smile, but they were pleased she was a tidy non-smoker who promised to pay the bills on time. The last person in the house had been *a nightmare*, they said; they wanted someone *responsible*. Amy wondered what Nat and Jordan thought of her now, and what they would make of a visit from her parents.
It was Nat’s nineteenth birthday and so Amy bought her a small bunch of flowers. It was all she could afford. Nat looked surprised and called Amy really sweet. Jordan and some friends sat around the kitchen table and drew up lists for the birthday party. Amy wasn’t sure she was invited since no one had actually asked her, but if she stayed away it might look rude, and in any case she had nowhere else to go late at night. So she ended up staying and put on her best dress, white, with the lowest back she’d ever worn, but all the girls were in T-shirts and jeans, even tiny shorts with ragged or lacy hems. And no one talked to her except a very tall boy with a stammer, who clinked her glass and told her he planned on getting w-w-wasted. Amy stood contemplating the word as she watched Nat and Jordan and their heaps of friends gyrating to very loud music, all bass and drums. She saw girls dancing on their own, or in twos and threes, in circles, and wondered how they had the nerve. No one else seemed to have brought a present.

Above the pulsating music, the doof doof beat, Amy heard someone knocking on the door. She looked around but everyone was dancing or talking, laughing, draping arms around shoulders. She heard the knocking again, bang bang bang bang, it was still going on as she walked to the door, hoping someone else would answer. She opened it, carefully, to see a short, sharp woman in a bright pink dressing-gown, pilled on the sleeves. Her hair was rumpled and her face was flushed and she smelt of cigarettes, like Amy’s brother. Can youse keep the bloody noise down! she shouted. Before Amy could answer, Jordan came up behind her and asked what seemed to be the trouble. I’ve got a little kid, the woman said. We need our sleep. Amy saw Jordan smile. She was beginning
to know that smile, the one that came when he called the woman madam and promised politely to turn the music down. The woman drew her dressing-gown tightly around her chest. I’ll call the cops, she said as Jordan closed the door. He sighed bloody neighbours, and then turned down the volume to shouts of protest and slurry groans. Amy wanted to shout back: There’s a child, but Jordan said it for her: some woman with a kid, going off her face.

The neighbours were new, even newer than Amy, and she saw them a few times in their front garden. The woman in very tight jeans tugging her child, a small, pale boy, maybe five or six, with dark brown curls. Because he wore grey pants and a pressed grey shirt and had a small backpack slung over his shoulders, Amy assumed he was being tugged to school. Once, as Amy was walking past, the mother let go of the boy and flung out her hands, shouts flying from her mouth, and the boy placed his hands over his ears. The mother screamed some more and pulled the boy’s hands away and he put them back again, calmly. This went on for some time, pulling away hands and putting them back, this strange show in the weedy garden, until the mother shoved the boy onto the footpath. But he never wavered, not for a moment, his elbows pointed outwards, his hands clamped tightly in place. Suddenly the woman turned and shouted at Amy, What’cha starin’ at? still pushing the boy along. Had your money’s worth?

On weekends Amy sometimes sat on the porch with a cup of tea, enjoying the vista of the street. Her own street back home was gravelled and bare, dusty in summer and sludgy in winter, with rows of sad asbestos houses on either side. But here there were friendly, bending trees and dappled light, flowers trailing over fences. Sometimes a bunch of girls,
eight or nine years old, played on the street: hopscotch and skippy, the games of her childhood. Amy was surprised. Back home her niece and nephew stayed indoors with their video games, even when the sun loudly called you to run outside to play. Her uni lecturer had told them that lack of physical exercise these days was seriously impeding children’s capacity to learn and to socialise. She had shown them the research. Amy liked to watch the girls with suntanned arms and sturdy legs as they jumped and skipped, and she liked to listen to their syncopated chants as they turned the heavy rope. *Your mother’s in the kitchen, your father cuts the meat, the baby’s in the cradle fast asleep.* Nat and Jordan grumbled as they sipped their coffee in the kitchen, wishing the children would *give it a rest*.

Once Jordan came out onto the porch and gave the girls a bit of a talking to, like Amy’s headmaster back home. Calm and polite, with just a hint of threat. She thought it must have taken Old Man Hooper, they called him, years to perfect that tone. When Jordan spoke, the girls stopped their chanting and looked up, puzzled, and then went back to their skipping. Amy liked this too, just as she liked the *thump, thump, thump* of the thick grey rope as it hit the ground, and the way it made a huge, looping arc, and how the skipping girls would wait for just the right moment, feint, duck their heads and run into a space.

Once, only once, the little boy from next door watched them too. He stood on the footpath and stared, his head circling slowly in time to the rope, his knees pointing inwards. He looked very small next to the skipping girls, and Amy wondered what it might be like to teach someone so tiny. Her science teacher had convinced her to go into teaching. He’d called her *very bright* and told her that high schools needed
people like her, especially in country towns. He’d sat her down at his desk after school, a man who made even the digestive system seem exciting and who always wore a tie, even during heatwaves. He sat her down and told her what no one had told her before. But now, looking at the little boy with his pointy knees, and even the skipping girls, she wasn’t so sure. And when one of the girls holding the rope stopped and beckoned the boy with a finger, when the boy stood on the spot and fiercely shook his head, Amy felt something move in her heart.

It was then that the mother came out and called for the boy to get inside, his dinner was on the table and it was getting cold and wasn’t going to wait any longer. Amy watched the boy standing his ground, his back still turned to his mother, and she heard the woman go on shouting that she didn’t have all day, hands on her hips, telling him to get a move on or she’d give him what for. On and on she went and the boy put his hands over his ears, standing on the spot like a staunch little warrior. Amy remembered the boys at school, how they stood up straight like this in the playground when a teacher yelled and yelled at them. *Tearing strips off you*, the kids called it, like flaying the skin. Shouting at them to *listen when I’m talking to you, son*. And the girls, how they kept their heads up when the teachers barked at them and said *what’s the point of me telling you, child, you never listen to a word I say*. All over the world, small children standing firm, not listening. Why should they listen, Amy thought, what was the point of ears?

By now the girls had stopped their game and were watching, watching like Amy, as the mother rushed down from her porch. She grabbed the little boy’s arms, yanked his hands from his ears, pulled him up the steps to the house and
through the door. He let himself be tugged and didn’t say a word. The girls looked at one another and then went back to their skipping. *I asked my mother for fifty cents to see the elephant jump the fence.*

Clasping her teacup tightly, Amy felt tears falling down her face.

It rained for the next few days and so there were no skipping girls on the street and no little boy standing by a gate, watching. But then, late in the evenings, three, four times in a row, Amy heard the woman next door. Her angry words through the bedroom window...*I told you so, how many times, stop it now, for cryin’ out loud...*Sometimes low and then rising to a shriek, with nothing in between. No spaces for the child, the boy, who might or might not be listening. Jordan said he was *incensed*, would go round and tell her to *cut it out*. He couldn’t think and do his assignment on foreign exchange rates with *all that bloody racket*. But Nat warned him off, *it’ll only cause trouble*, she said. *You’ll have the woman screaming at you, at all of us. I know the kind;* nodding her head. *It’s displacement. Maladjustment.* But Amy was no longer listening. All she could hear was the woman’s voice, and no spaces in between.

Nat and Jordan went down south for a weekend, with a car full of CDs, DVDs and beer. Amy was glad they hadn’t asked her, and she liked the empty spaces, the silence in the house. No one else’s music, no sudden body in the bathroom. She wondered whether she was becoming intolerant, or whether she was one of those people who would end up living alone. One of those people: Amy found herself looking in the full-length mirror in Nat’s bedroom. The door was ajar and she just wandered in, not snooping or prying, just wanting, on impulse, to look in the mirror and see who she was. She saw
a tall thin girl with a long plain face. Mousy, or, less kindly, horsey; some kind of animal. But not a high-school teacher: she didn’t look like her teachers back home or the lecturers at uni. Those bright, bubbly women who used clotted words like multiple intelligences, and the man who wore Mickey Mouse ties and told them about cognitive development and learning difficulties. Amy hadn’t known it would be like this, so many words, and she saw as she looked in the mirror that she wouldn’t be much older than her students and there was no way in the world she could carry this off, seem confident, in control. A noble profession, Old Man Hooper had called it, shaking her hand when her results came through, her science teacher patting her on the back. It was the first time, the only time, either of them had touched her. It was one of the rules, she knew, about teachers and students, and she understood it made a sad kind of sense.

That weekend there was hardly any noise from next door and so Amy managed to finish a big assignment on student-centred learning – 3,000 words, excluding quotes. She was keeping up with the science so far, she’d already covered a lot in school. But she’d failed her first assessment on educational philosophy and had gone to talk to her lecturer, who’d said to never be afraid to ask for help. Amy thought, hoped, she’d done a better job this time but couldn’t be sure. It was a relief to do the dishes and clean the bathroom, check the fridge to see what they needed. She decided to stock up before Nat and Jordan came home. They would like that, she thought, and they would pay her back. At least they were fair about things like that.

The supermarket was open on Sundays. It was one of the things Amy liked about living in the city, how you could
walk in anytime and there was so much to choose from. Even if she felt like a real country nerd standing in front of rows of shampoos, so many kinds you didn’t know where to start. Volumiser or De-frizz or Colour Fast, would it really make a difference? She liked looking at the different kinds of cheeses, and all the chocolates, some from her childhood: Musketeers, Bullets, White Knights. Standing now in the confectionary aisle, along with all the others trying to decide, she remembered the day a new ice-cream had come to her town, she and her brother had seen it on TV. Magnum Intense. When they were very young and had taken the first big bite, ended up with chocolate all over their faces.

She decided on the Swiss Chalet and was turning to go when she saw him standing next to her. The little boy from next door, dressed in a bright blue shirt. All alone, with his hands over his ears. Amy had never been up close before and she saw now that his eyes were blue, and empty, and that his mouth was fixed in a grim little line. She looked around for the mother and then down again at the boy, at the pitiful, terrible blank of his eyes. So she leaned down, put an arm around his shoulder and said what needed to be said. Shall we find your mummy? Carefully removing one hand from one ear. Shall we go and look for Mummy? And then a voice shouted in the distance, his mother striding down the aisle, marching now, hollering at Amy to leave the boy alone. Get your hands off of my son, she cried, everyone staring or trying not to look. Before Amy had time to think, the woman wrenched her arm away from the boy, still shouting, and then slapping him on the back of one leg, slapping again, shouting, I said don’t get lost…how many times…stupid kid…stupid stupid moron…Slapping again and making stinging, hot red marks on the little boy’s leg.
Amy grabbed the woman’s hand and looked her in the eye. *Don’t you dare hit him!* she said, stern and strong. *You have no right!*

The woman looked down at Amy’s hand and up into her face. She stopped her slapping and wrenching, her merciless words, standing perfectly still and crying now, slow tears and then faster, gasping for breath. She fell down on her knees, wrapped her arms around her child and sobbed into his side. *I’m sorry Beau, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,* and looking up into Amy’s face she sobbed some more, shoulders heaving with the strain.

Amy placed one hand on the woman’s head and said quietly, firmly, *Let’s get you home, you and Beau.* And then, because her mum would have said this, *Let’s make you a nice cup of tea.* She wondered what Nat and Jordan would say when they saw them in their kitchen, the woman and her boy with no ears. But then she remembered it was her kitchen too, and for just a moment, before the future rushed towards her, before assignments and whiteboards and visits home, before standing in front of unknown children and unknown mirrors and wondering what she saw, this single, certain thought made her happy.