

What We Learned From Driving in Winter

“Rendered in such atmospheric detail, vivid and personal.”

—BALLI KAUR JASWAL,
author of *Sugarbread*

“I love this novel with my whole heart.”

—INEZ TAN,
author of *This Is Where I Won't Be Alone*



CARISSA FOO

“Carissa Foo’s novel about displacement and belonging made me think about friendship in all its dimensions. The wintry days of student life and the English countryside are rendered in such atmospheric detail, becoming more vivid and personal through Gigi’s clear-eyed narrative. Although it is a tragedy that drives the journey of these characters, it is ultimately their search for hope that brings them to a new understanding of who and where they are.”

—**BALLI KAUR JASWAL**, bestselling author of
Sugarbread and *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*

“A shimmering love letter to the shifting seasons of the friendships that leave their mark forever, and a moving meditation on the contours of winter and the unexpected ways a person enters your heart. Every page is suffused with the warmth and tenderness of these three unlikely housemates, from their blazing intelligence to the comforting rituals they create for one another. Once again, Carissa Foo’s piercing insight shines in this moving story of young love, spiritual questioning and the impossible search for a way forward in the wake of shattering loss. I love this novel with my whole heart.”

— **INEZ TAN**, bestselling author of *This Is Where I Won’t Be Alone*

What We Learned From Driving in Winter

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CARISSA FOO



EPIGRAM

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

If It Were Up to Mrs Dada

(longlisted for the 2017 Epigram Books Fiction Prize)

For Cheryl Julia Lee

Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.

–H.D., “Oread”

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

–Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner



PART ONE
WINTER, 2016—2017

I

Snow fell as the car sped along the undivided country road. We were passing an old grey barn, noticing everything in view—the slate roof, the tricoloured Christmas lights, the sign that read *Wedding Show. Wine Tasting. Wensleydale for Sale*—when the rain-sensing wipers were activated. Our excitement for cranberry and cheese drowned out the murmurs of the first fall of snow. En put a pin on Tithe Barn on the A170 to remember to visit someday. If we ever come to Yorkshire again.

Because it was quicker to get to Robin Hood's Bay by rail, we rented a red Fiesta and drove at forty miles per hour on the motorway to prolong our stay in England. Driving brings in a lot of beauty and tunes out the pains in loss. The thoughts we had about Clare went away with the vanishing roads and setting sun. The meandering country route with occasional sweeping corners was rescuing. Speed bumps and the dread of hitting a rabbit kept me vigilant.

Driving could not erase the absence of a person but driving

with En in the passenger's seat made the wound less open. Two is better than one because they will have good return for their labour: the half-day drive brought us to God's Own Country, as the locals liked to call it. Though one is overpowered, two can defend themselves: we downloaded a '90s playlist and all of Taylor Swift's albums, stocked up on cheese, biscuits, juice and crisps. We were a cord of three strands that was not quickly broken. I imagined Clare sitting behind. She might have opened the window to smell the air. En was beside me, sleeping for most of the travelling.

What we learned from driving in winter was that a hillingar could be a mirage in the cold and happens when water freezes overnight and turns the windows frosty white. What was this arctic phenomenon that was a must-experience for her? That gloomy skies could somehow transform the land into a blank slate? A miracle, she called it. A habitual praise for the Almighty, something I got used to within the first week of meeting her.

Clare wrote down that the hillingar had nothing to do with hills. *Teras*, or *τέρας*, she noted in the group chat, believing that we would figure it out despite our lack of response. The Greek concordance defines *teras* as “a unique and extraordinary event awakening wonder”. Her idea of miracle was edifying, but we did not care to read well. Even death could not convert us. It's hard for the backslidden and heathens to believe in miracles. More like children without rein, we called it whatever we wanted. *Hard water. Leftover snow. Clare's fault. Fuck winter.*

England. She was not around to explain things anyway. Not a whisper to fend off the attacks on the one who did not save her from the sea. Eventually, En and I grew tired of fighting the cold air and reading between the lines. Nothing left to parse but the creased postcard that was larger than her life.

Pickering, YO18 7AA. A stamp to verify her presence in the North East, in addition to the sign-off date: *22 December 2015.* The numbers in red ink had smudged a little. Mulled wine left a brown stain near the postal code. She had sent it on the day of solstice.

En and I came up with our own versions of how we had spent that day. En insisted that we were shopping for baubles and nutcrackers at Marks & Spencer—which was what we did the previous weekend. I reminded her about the glutinous rice balls, how a casual remark on sesame paste spun into a ridiculously intense argument over the filling. En insisted on peanut and I chose sesame. As it often happened with most disagreements, En usually got what she wanted. We were definitely in the kitchen that day because we had binge-watched recipes for rice balls, eventually deciding to stick with our favourite Auntie PeranaKANG's trusty cooking tutorials. En conceded at last, probably calling to mind the sweet victory that tasted like peanut butter.

We agreed on this version:

En and I were in our warmed-up apartment in London. We spent half the day rolling out the dough and filling the little balls

with peanut butter, the extra crunchy type. En threw chunks of ginger and a bag of Twinings ginger tea into the syrupy soup because ginger is a hearty ingredient. Good to purge the cool winds of winter and spice up the grey Christmas. Our phones might have been buzzing, but our dirty fingers were busy dabbing at the flour and each other's faces. It looked like it was snowing in the house.

When in spite of gravity and our inabilities, the rice balls floated to the surface of the pot, we scooped them out into our matching bowls. While waiting for them to cool, we could have checked our phones. Instead, we were tuned in to G.E.M.'s new album. Then we took a nap and later got ready to binge-watch *Orange* through the evening. At any time that day, I could have clicked on the notifications on the phone. En could have too. But there was always something to do. We might have dismissed the notifications too quickly because of our hunger. It is not unusual to feel hungry all the time in winter. I could not explain how I was negligent in checking my phone, even though I had doggedly tracked the new delivery boy from Long's Kitchen who had lost his way.

Meanwhile Clare was at the post office, wanting to tell us all kinds of things: which villages were abandoned, which café was her favourite in Bay Town, how life seemed clearer with fresh air, how feelings could be put off. For many people, sending a postcard is a novelty. Postcards are things you buy at museums and craft stores, never to write on them until it's someone's

birthday and you haven't got a card at home. Clare had sent one postcard; it was a little creased when we found it. The bulk of her communication was found in the fifty-something text messages and three pictures she had sent to the group chat. The first picture was of her boots. They looked black, even though she'd insisted the sea had washed them grey. The next was of the sun. A very ordinary picture of the sun setting; you couldn't tell it was taken from the North East. One was of her hand holding the envelope with our address written on it. *A picture for proof.*

Clare: Happy 冬至! (7.43am)

Clare: I'm going to Victoria's beach later. Just hope my Doc Marts dry soon. They're still soaked from yesterday's waves. (7.43am)

Clare: It's super cold here. The radiator in the room wasn't exactly the best... (7.43am)

Clare: @ENPOWERED if you want tangyuan, try the second shelf of the freezer. There should be a packet behind the frozen berries. Got ginger and mandarin peel in the spice cabinet. (9.31am)

Clare: There's also pu-erh in the second drawer. (9.32am)

Clare: Are you all up? (9.32am)

Clare: I just had the best PBJ toastie for brunch. Hmm it's more like a bap actually. It's so good! (11.55am)

Clare: How are you spending tonight? (11.55am)

Clare: I'm sending you something from the Bay. Some salt

and love. (2.22pm)

Clare: Here's a picture for proof. The Christmas season may cause some delay though... (2.22pm)

She sealed the salt and love in an envelope to prevent the ink from smudging. The corners and sides were taped to waterproof it. Because things got dingy in winter and mail carriers might be sloppy.

The postcard was a generic print of the coast of North Yorkshire. It could also be any coast in the North East. You could tell it was bitterly cold from how difficult it was to separate the milky white crests of breaking waves from the blanket of snow on the beach. *Walking in a winter wonderland without you.* Only Clare could get away with that opening note. The next few lines were more difficult to read. And the last line, the last line was inconclusive, seeming to mean different things each time it was recited. *Take care of one another this winter!* was penned hastily, the "a" and "o" were indistinct, as if the hand was eager to withdraw from the biting cold. Or she might have been wearing gloves, which would affect her usually immaculate handwriting.

What En and I did not learn on our road trip but found out later from the internet was how to defrost the car windows by turning on the air conditioner to remove the moisture in the air, then switching to the heater to warm the windows until they were above the dew point so the air could be cooled. There was supposed to be a recirculation button that looked like a

U-turn sign to dehumidify the air and a button with the letters “ECT” that would reduce throttle to help our driving in cold temperatures. We found out later from the rental company that this particular Ford was fitted with a dedicated heated screen—so that was the odd button with a rectangle and zig-zag line. These were some of the things we learned from driving in winter, options one never needs in Singapore.

Without a manual for driving in winter, En and I scratched at the glass with our gloved hands. A negligible amount of ice came off. We managed to keep our fingernails intact, unlike Clare who broke one when scraping the frost. In our group chat, she lamented the silly action and highlighted the importance of a de-icer and snow brush. This we had ignored back then and continued to ignore, for they were things I could not justify buying for a one-off trip. I also didn’t know the damage of snow then, apart from occasional slips that I attributed to my clumsiness. I thought the soft and velvety-looking stuff must be harmless, especially in a place with no skyscrapers and industrial chimneys. My assumption was snow in the North East must be prettier than snow in London. Apparently, when too much fluff accumulates, vision is hazy and driving in winter becomes dangerous. En and I used water from our flask to break the ice on the windows. We learned that clarity is precious and difficult to achieve when driving in winter. Keeping one’s eyes on a fogged-up windscreen along a road without lampposts is challenging enough, never mind the threat of sleet or a skittish roe. It was

befuddling to us why she would text in the group chat to say that there’s transparency in winter and that the view of the sea was clear. A moment of musing, I thought. Bodies of water have always been an inspiration for revelations: Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog”, Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You*. But I lacked the room for imagination. All I could feel was a nagging uncertainty about the weather, the unfamiliar road signs, the sea, what we might find or miss along the way. I had a flimsy paper brochure filled with walking trails and a column about winter birds. I was still trying to figure out how the roundabouts worked. I saved her pictures into a folder I dared not open. My hands very rarely left the wheel, not even for a crisp or to ease an itch. That was the way to have some control over the unknowable days ahead.

En was the more sanguine traveller. She had confidence in the voice of the GPS. The app that cost us five pounds to download was to take us to the source, but this journey to the North East was one among elementals, and the snow and the heart are not beholden to technology. It was apparent to us as we left London that the unpredictability of the elements would override our search for answers and upturn my meticulous Excel sheet.

Not by choice, Robin Hood’s Bay became our destination. It wasn’t as if we could reason with the dead, to veto the choice of a godforsaken coastal village. Why this place? Why the sea? Why would anyone do such a thing to herself? Any question for the dead is a lifelong monologue. At some point, you give up

curiosity and allow your queries to dangle. Living with suspense and in the unknown becomes a habit. You can get used to things if the things stay long enough.

Because we could not erase what had already been plotted—and knowing history has a way of repeating itself, even in ways seemingly unrecognisable—En and I obliged the itinerary, making small, spontaneous alterations as we drove from Lancaster to Robin Hood's Bay. In the barely warmed-up car, where the air conditioning kicked on and off, En added Scarborough, Ravenscar and Staithes to our pinned locations, the once-resort town and seaside villages left behind by the young and modern. These were her attempts to find the café with the best PBJ toastie. We never found the place.

Neither of us could explain how a weekend trip dragged out into a week of cheap stays at the Premier Inn paid for by En's supplementary card. We had to call up the rental company to extend the car lease. We were underdressed for the inclement weather and did not prepare enough clothes. Thankfully there's always a big Tesco somewhere. Cheap innerwear from Tesco and a smart down jacket from Primark, and lots of steaming instant noodles for extra heat—that's how a poor student like me survives England's winter. En might have had her mother's backing, but I was not yet earning an income. All of my stipend and savings from part-time work at Chang's Oriental Grocer were financing this trip. That winter, we were fresh graduates who had overstayed our time in England, assuming recklessness

was the same as courage. I suppose that's how we made our cross-country pilgrimage from the South to the North West to the North East.

The first part of the journey was without breaks. A four-hour drive from London to Lancaster because En had to "find closure", as she had put it. On a dead-end street called Whinfall Drive, we stopped outside a house with violet-tinted windows. En dragged out from the boot two canvas bags filled with clothes and plushies, and left them at the gate without ringing the bell. We did not speak about closure anymore.

After Lancaster, the real road trip began. We were mostly silent in the car. I was chewing gum to stay attentive, and En was trying to sleep. The roads became more dangerous once we drove past the sign that welcomed us into the scene of dark yellow and brown, speckled with the whites of snow and overcast with sad clouds. We had arrived in the county of North Yorkshire.

Driving through the high and undulating road of Buttertubs Pass, bouncing up and down in our seats as we rolled over stony potholes, was conducive to mildly playful conversations and chuckles. En and I were feeling excited; our eyes sparkled as we passed peaceful white fields and dramatic trees whose contorted finger-like branches pointed us to this and that.

As night fell quickly, we scrambled on the B6160, which was a distributor road with less traffic. We pulled up into a village called Starbotton and checked into a coaching inn. In this part of England, almost every room is one with a view. We let our

heads hang out of the window to breathe air that was so keen and crisp it smacked the back of our mouths. We saw a sky stippled with stars, constellated messages and shapes that were wasted on us. The next day, we left as soon as breakfast was served and finished.

On the way to the Bay, we saw the forlorn Castle Bolton and stopped by to take post-worthy tourist pictures. At this point, where we were on the map, we were simply too distracted to give attention to the beauty of the land. We were so close to Wensleydale—the name that we had seen so many times on the refrigerator shelves of Tesco was an actual place that had a postal code! The same way Cornish pasty has nothing to do with corn but is associated with Cornwall.

We visited the original Wensleydale Creamery in a place called Hawes and shamelessly tasted as many cheeses as we could. The elderly lady with the tasting tray held a congenial smile, all the time asking us where we were from, amazed by our English-speaking capabilities. En settled on the Original Crumbly, and I paid fifteen quid for an assortment of fruity varieties. At the counter, on a whim, we bagged the Oak Smoked and some water biscuits. We drove away with enough cheese for three people.

Even though En did not want to stay in Brontë village, I made sure to drive through the North York Moors National Park. In my memory, it's a barren and wild place, in between Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights, where freedom and peril await. The brochure described it as a moorland with

religious ruins and muddy river valleys. We saw craggy rock walls that came dangerously close to the car. We saw the saddest sky in England, without a shade of blue or pop of orange. We surveyed the heather-clad moors, a brownish purple sight. We saw them quickly and without regrets. Visibility was low, for the rain blurred the view from inside the car. The snow-dusted pavements looked like flattened gravestones, mourning the old times before the glaciers melted. On the map, it read *The Great Scar Limestones*. The story went something like this: small-scale erosions happened and losses accumulated until the valley was too deep, and North Yorkshire was scarred forever. The battered land was saved by the occasional light snowfalls that blanketed the tarmac and turned the county tranquil and soft. On the A65, the site of many accidents, we passed the three peaks that looked like three tiers forming a stairway to heaven. We did not stop to take in the buoyant air or to behold nature's wonders. The only air we inhaled was pervaded by the sour scent of salt-and-vinegar crisps and vanilla-flavoured smoke from En's vape pen.

The interesting thing about driving with a wound in the heart was that the pressure of just sitting down for hours staunched the bleeding and directed the agony to the stomach. An ache is an ache, and sometimes a grieving heart could pass off as a gurgling stomach. Our depleting rations and benumbed feet brought us to a town called Redcar, where we bought more cheap cheese and juice. We drove on Lord Street until we came to a roundabout and circled five times to find the right exit to the Esplanade. I'd

always thought the Newton Circus roundabout back home was a nightmare until I drove in England. A friend told me that, further south in Cornwall, there's a magic roundabout with six exits. Apparently, the Brits like their roads cooperative rather than dictated by traffic lights.

"This is it," En said, when we turned into a narrow carriageway. A few cars surged up while a small tractor dropped behind us. "Eh, this is it," she said again, and we pulled up into the driveway of a stranger's house. The sea, all for the sea. In the winter light, the coast had the mysterious mood of a Monet painting: sea foam washing over and over the pale cream beach, the North Sea like a pirate pilfering rocks and glass, a twinkling here and there in the sand. The sea had given itself to us to look at, as if beauty were a kind of hospitality. I was relieved, feeling quite certain that I liked the view. I turned to En, who looked away, and I knew the feeling was mutual.

We stood a metre apart, the sound of waves and wintering gulls around us. We listened to the sea until we no longer heard it. The sky had opened up. Light snow was falling. Many things were palpable, including the brooding feeling that London took care to hide. Staring at the sea, the rocks, the horizon, and then peering at En, I thought I understood. Every detail had its own validity here. In that moment, it was easier to see why Clare might have tried to find back routes to the North Sea.

II

A breeze was blowing keenly through the beach, ruffling the untucked hair that fell around her shoulders. En stood at the edge of the sea, where small waves broke gently and lapped around her feet.

"Found any jet?" I yelled.

En was waving her arms. From afar, the lean, narrow frame resembled a scarecrow guarding the sea of the mysterious dark lignite we were searching for.

I waved back and shouted, "Anything black?"

She bent down to cuff her leggings, ready for a paddle.

"Isn't it too cold?"

She looked up to the rocks where I was standing and then pointed to the sun that was directly overhead. "Not as cold," En shouted. "Come here lah!"

I took a step and almost slipped, quickly ducking back into the safety of dry rocks. When I regained my footing, En was already rather far away from me, standing ankle-deep in the water.

"Gigi! The water is warmer than the shore. Hurry up, come!"

I found a smooth enough rock and sat down.

“Come!”

I appeared not to hear her. The sound of the sea was more crushing than inviting. I had to admit to myself that the boiling sea was not at all wondrous. To admire its force and beauty from afar was one thing; to walk into it was a terrifying thought. In fact, I was sort of struggling with the body of water we had been chasing for the past couple of days. Well, with all waters in general.

According to the fortune teller, my birth element is fire, and as an Aries, I am susceptible to random bouts of energy, not unlike how a pile of coal can suddenly burst into flames. Fire can burn out quickly; it can also restart from cool embers. This passion and persistence I had not yet known, though it wasn't difficult to intuit that slower-moving elements like water and earth would hold me back. The same way En held on to her ex-lovers and their stuff long past their expiration dates. All signs point to water as my weakness. My life concurred with the predictions. Thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool at six, because apparently the best way to learn how to swim was to jump in unheedingly, I was near-drowning when my mother pulled me out. Our cousin-instructor was banned from taking me and my brothers to the pool. Still, we continued with our Sunday morning swim at Yishun Swimming Complex. Even when my mother left us, we continued with the ritual. Danny and Teddy were average swimmers; they never took formal lessons, never

got to wear their pyjamas in the pool. But they insisted on going to the swimming complex every Sunday. It was one of the few things we did with our mother that we remembered in the same way.

I would sit on the plastic bench with the clothes and towels, counting laps while my brothers did the work. I had a whistle hanging around my neck that I'd blow each time they completed a lap. My kind of encouragement. Happiness was just sitting there, watching and blowing the whistle. Every now and then, Danny and Teddy would try to lure me to the edge of the pool with tiresome requests for goggles or a float, to remind me how much I used to like dipping my toes into the water when my mother dangled me over the surface. On those mornings, I looked forward to my brothers splashing water at me, to lunch at the hawkers centre, to group tuition at Chong Pang Community Centre, relegating the swimming pool to mere background.

On the bench was where I preferred to be. I found it difficult to return to the pool. I just couldn't trust water anymore. Even though I could see through the chlorinated water and knew exactly how shallow or deep each section was according to the depth markers, there was something about the drag and ripples that messed with my depth perception. Memory was also a deterrent. I remembered my mouth full of chlorinated water. I remembered the water pushing me up and the water pushing me down. It's strange, to be buoyant and sinking at the same time. Many things are beyond reason in the coldness of the water when the body, in acute survival mode, forgets to feel. Even the best

swimmer, I was told, could drown in the calm, freezing water.

I had accepted as a child that the bottom of the pool was never ever going to be attainable for me. I wasn't tall enough; I wasn't my brothers. I was afraid of not floating. To make up for a life without swimming, I picked up other essential skills like cycling and driving. If I were adept at land navigation, I might somehow rely on my sense of direction if I ever found myself underwater or at sea. That was the way I convinced myself about the importance of driving, a belief supported by my brothers and grandfather, who willingly contributed to my learning fund. On the day I turned eighteen, I signed up for classes at the driving centre. Four months later, I passed the test and began packing for the move to London.

Left is left and north is north, whether you're driving or swimming. Polaris doesn't really change its position. Even in pitch darkness, the right hand knows where to find the left. The body knows where to find its place, where to find its person. Yet, as our road trip was proving to me, the confidence in my directional skills was not enough to bring me into the water. Driving along the coastline was as close to the water as I could be.

Even as I brought myself to the beach of Robin Hood's Bay, wet sand falling between my fingers, I could not touch the water. Near my feet, pebbles were nesting in the sand, some opalescent and smooth. I looked around at the surrounding rocks and wondered which ones she sat on and lay her head. Which rock was it that she had trusted to safekeep her belongings? These

prehistoric rocks knew more than we did. I ran my finger along the edges of a small rock that was resting beside me, as though it were a magic lamp, and some genie would appear and answer my burning questions.

En was shouting again. "Don't have lah!" She was done trifling with the waves and squatted down to wipe her feet. I gestured for her to come over to the rocks.

She was beaming as she walked towards me. She had the easy gait of a dancer, sidestepping the coquina rocks, full of life, trading her secret sorrows for the joy of the sea. Scrunched in her hand were sea-soaked tissue papers.

"Eh, why you never come? The sea was warming leh. Better than you sitting here."

"Nah. I like it here."

"The waves were washing my feet. She's right, it's a nice feeling." She bent down to tie her laces.

En offered her hand to pull me up. The blustery sea wind had turned her cheeks rosy. I could tell she was already missing her time in the water.

"Found anything?" I said, reminding her of our mission.

She pulled a face. "Think we got duped leh. No fucking jet. Just seashells and glass."

"I guess we're done with this place," I said with disappointment. I really wanted to be fond of Bay Town. While the rocks were quite smooth and the sky was less grey than expected, I found nothing too remarkable about the place. What was so obviously

beautiful about it that I was missing? Why here to end it all?

En nodded. She did not see real beauty too.

“Shall we go to Scarborough then? Or you rather visit that town with fish and chips?” I asked.

“I want to go to Scarborough.”

“Okay.”

I took the tissues from her and dumped them into the mini rubbish bag fastened to my satchel. With my gloves on and coat buttoned up, I was ready to leave.

“Actually,” she said and paused.

“What?”

En turned her back towards me. “I want a hot chocolate and something to munch before we go.” She pointed to the top of the slipway. “I think she went to this place called The Bay Coffee Shop. How original. Scared people don’t know it’s a café here.”

I must have winced at the note of derision in her voice. “How you know?” I asked.

En tapped on her phone and pulled up a picture of the shop within seconds. “See,” she said, swiftly magnifying the signboard in the background. I was thankful for the gesture, not wanting to catch a glimpse of the rest of the picture.

I conceded and gently pushed her hand down to put the phone away.

She went on, “Bet she did a quick search and clicked on the first place that popped up.”

“Obvious doesn’t mean it’s not good,” I said.

En nodded pensively. “Yeah. She’s usually right when it comes to coffee.”

About most things, I wanted to say. Before I could answer, En grabbed me and put our hands into her patch pocket.

“I want hot chocolate now! Let’s go this way,” she said, bringing us away from the sea and uphill into town.

It was a one-way street from the slipway to The Bay Coffee Shop. Even though we were without wheeled luggage and the café was only a ten-minute walk away, we dragged ourselves into the narrow alleys and sauntered in and out, to stay a little longer with the street and its mom-and-pop shops. Sooner or later, they would be forced out of business by a mall or Starbucks.

The Bay Coffee Shop was a hole-in-the-wall type of café. Modest and woody, it made us feel at home quite effortlessly. There was a tinge of vanilla but more prominent was the smell of cedar. Like the scent at home. We always had a vanilla-and-cedar-scented candle on the dining table. It was the one thing we made sure to replenish before it burnt out. We were more attentive to the candle than to our supply of rice or milk. The main notes were juniper, vanilla and musk. En was happy because it smelled like the woods; I thought anything powder sweet was winning. Clare liked it because we liked it. We also persuaded her that it would bring the forest into our concrete enclave.

With a signage that said *Farm-2-Table*, wood-grain furniture and hanging planters, the shop was abounding in nature. There was a soy option for all drinks, no extra charge. Most

sandwiches on the menu were vegan; you could choose either rye, sourdough or gluten-free country loaf. No service charge at The Bay Coffee Shop.

Until a couple of minutes ago, I hadn't thought of Clare as an environmentally friendly person, though she did make pasta and dumplings from scratch. She also had a pot of spring onions that did not stop sprouting until En and I gave up on it. I just assumed Clare preferred to make her own stuff. Rather than a connoisseur who was picky about the freshness of produce, Clare might have been the sort who didn't want to harm the environment.

En was ordering food and drinks at the cashier while I wandered to the window. The counter area was too small to accommodate both of us. The window at the farthest corner looked original. Old, perhaps rotting inside. I imagined Victorian fishermen running up the street with the jet they found in their nets to sell at the local jewellers. This was a sash window, patterned in a way to let sunlight stream in while keeping prying eyes out.

I stood by the window and watched the baleful clouds stream across the sky. Quite unexpectedly, it was darker outside. Just like that, they had taken over. The sun backed down and disappeared behind a nimbus cloud.

I left my beanie on a table and circled back to the counter.

"Sorry, can I change the iced latte to a hot latte, please?" I asked the girl whose tag read *Safe Zone*.

"Of course, you can," she said.

I continued: "Thank you very much. And can we sit at the table by the window?"

"Of course. You can sit anywhere you want," she replied and held a smile. She also told us that she'd bring our drinks and toasties to us.

As we inched our way through the narrow space between tables, En put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me close.

"Why are you so troublesome? So many requests," En said, waving her finger at me like I was a brat.

"It's a nice view. You'll thank me later."

"See what? The gloom and doom? It's hailing outside," she said, as she rubbed my flattened hat-hair.

After removing the layers of clothes, we flung our bags onto the floor and slumped quickly into the cushioned chairs.

The waitress brought our orders to the table. She had a badge on her apron that said *SAFE*. Staring at the plate before me, I was starting to think about the possible dangers in this Robin Hood town.

"Here's the mushroom melt with cashew cheese. We ground them ourselves," said the bright-eyed waitress.

En had a smirk on her face. Her sandwich was filled with a kind of fake pulled pork with almond cheese. She did not complain but kept dousing the plate of food with hot sauce. The chirpy waitress came over again to ask if we were enjoying the food. En said the texture of the pork was interesting.

We finished the sandwiches while the rain and hail fell. The pellets bounced onto the glass to make a tip-tap sound. Like a shy door-to-door salesman knocking.

“You like this place?” En said, recovering from hunger and fatigue.

“I can see why it’s charming,” I replied. I blew the steam from the cup and sipped my coffee.

“Because it’s provincial and out of touch?” En made a quizzical face.

“Kinda. But in a good way. Pace of life seems slow. You don’t have to be too fast—”

“Don’t have to be pushed by the crowd or worry about going against traffic and whatnot.”

“Yah, nothing like London.”

“Or Singapore.”

I nodded and sighed with relief. “Yeah. It’s like, just standing still and doing nothing is okay in this place. You get what I mean?”

“Yah, like this is enough. Whatever this is.” She poked at the uneaten piece of bread on her plate.

I folded my lips.

Enough. En said the word with some comfort, as if it were a feeling. I stared down at my coffee, the heart design on the surface was disintegrating. I blew my breath out slowly to shape it into a blob like Flubber.

What does enough feel like? A feeling that things are done

and dusted, I thought. That nothing else can be done. A kind of relief too. Three years of university education and I still wasn’t sure if I was ready for the world at large. I couldn’t even think of a synonym for enough. Adequate, perhaps. Was I adequate for the working world? Already I was failing at the subject of loss.

Did Clare feel enough here? Did she know she was more than enough?

En flashed a look of satisfaction, slurping her ginger-spiced chocolate.

Outside the sound of falling hail was getting louder, drowning out my thoughts and the silence between En and me. The waitress came to clear the table and returned with a new order of beverages. Our rough plan was to sit and drink until the hail stopped.

I put my hands around the mug as though it were a hot-water bag. En followed suit. The feeling of never being warm enough kept us bound to each other. En then said in a cheerful way, pushing her mug to my side of the table: “It’s a bit like Milo with ginger.”

“You mean Milo halia?”

We relaxed a bit.

I wiped my lip balm off her mug. “Reminds me of Ovaltine with a kick.”

En laughed. “Well, maybe that’s why she liked it here. A taste of Singapore. Who knows. Did you see that weird coconut jam ciabatta on the menu? I won’t be surprised if it tastes like kaya toast.”

A brief silence made room for the shape of a person occupying the extra chair between us.

I looked at the menu hanging on the wall to avert her gaze. En's composure had betrayed her. As she stood up to wear her coat, eager to evacuate the place, she rattled on about the fake meat, the lack of warmth, the awful weather, our pilgrimage. Somewhere between the first and the last lament, En had blurted out her name. She was too tired to fight the deluge of memories. Watery eyes can be mistaken for tired eyes, as too much yawning and sleep can hide the signs of sadness.

Calmly, I dressed and took the bill to the counter. I left En at the table because I would have wanted that for myself. I would have wanted someone to settle the bill and leave me alone for a few minutes. I glanced back and she was tying and untying her scarf. So, like habit, I managed a pleasant and forgettable chat with the *Safe Zone* girl at the counter. I told her that the food was great and we really enjoyed ourselves. I left a one-pound tip as evidence.

When I walked out of The Bay Coffee Shop, En was in the toilet. Outside it was teeming with rain. Tears were prickling my eyelids. I wouldn't let them fall. There must be a limit to how much water one can bear in a day.

III

How Clare failed to mention that jet was priced for royalty was something En and I could not wrap our heads around. We were not Victoria and did not share her fortune in love or pounds. There was no more jet left ashore; the sea had become a closed mine too.

She told us that jet was rare. "Jet is essentially a fossil," she said and pulled up a picture of a black stone from the online brochure. A fossil from the Jurassic period. In the North East, jet is the same as old gold. Since Thatcher shut down the mines in the '80s, there were no other mines but the North Sea, which finds and houses precious stones until a storm comes and passes by, causing hundreds of possible pieces of jet to wash up on white sand. For this reason, Clare said it was best to find jet in winter, for the season has a higher chance of stormy weather. More waves, more jet. Like her, we thought we'd find jet scattered on the beach. It's impossible to explain the origin of our optimism, maybe it was thoughtlessness or youth. It might have something to do with

Clare's hope that often crept into our lives and appeared without warning in the remotest contexts. Like how we were undeterred by the snow and the lashing sea at Robin Hood's Bay. How we had decided readily and without words that a road trip to the English coastal towns was the right thing to do in winter. Sympathy hope, that's what En called it.

Carrying the hope of a friend, our stomachs full of caffeine and bread and cheese, we refused to drive back to the hotel without what we really came for. Options were few in a small fishing village. There were the run-of-the-mill nautical rope bracelets and seashell pendants. There were shops that sold fancy stones like lapis lazuli and sodalite, and ones that displayed brass necklaces and lace ornaments. We stopped outside one Shelley & Sons Jewellery whose display window intimated the sale of real jet. Through the glass, the gold and black were competing for our attention, and unable to appreciate the glamour or afford the view, we continued our search for other souvenirs.

An alley tucked between Boots and the post office was where we found Wear With Love. We walked into a shop with a low ceiling, and what seemed like a museum of rocks and dinosaur remains. The shopkeeper with dreadlocks and a red woolly beard was either a bohemian who had lost his way or a shipwrecked pirate from a time lost to ours. When he opened his mouth, his accent was like James McAvoy's. Brodie was a student at the University of Glasgow, taking a leave of absence to pursue his interests in metal work.

He led us into a backroom and showed us his treasures: tarnished silver, coppery chains, pearl earrings, many skull charms. En took a ring from the stash. It was silver enough and not outlandish. She handed Brodie a tenner and then another tenner. He gave us his Etsy shop details and said to call him if we're ever in Glasgow. I took down his number, for there was a higher chance of visiting Glasgow than returning to Bay Town.

En and I walked out of the placeless cove with a discount voucher and matching arrow rings to remember the town. And, who knows, if and when the ring tarnished, it might resemble jet. We could wear the ring with the arrow facing out or facing in. Three hours were enough for us to comb the town. Clare might have taken five. She would have been sitting in The Bay Coffee Shop to reflect on the posterity of small towns: to resist or to move on? How many cups of long black to untangle the problems of the world? That afternoon when we set off for Scarborough, we had fake jet and shots of caffeine, our hearts hopeful.

According to Robert Frost, there is a road taken and the road less travelled. The road we had been driving on was a single carriageway that went up a blind summit and down into another hilly terrain. There are dips in life that humble us, and there are dips on the road that excite the driver and her passenger. We accelerated lawlessly, because we thought the derestriction sign meant no speed was off limits. I never understood miles. What was the metric equivalent of a yard? And why did the voice on the GPS keep saying "please bear left" and "take the ramp ahead"?

There was never a ramp per se, nothing distinctly sloping up or down. Words from the Queen that we'd never learn and never use in Singapore.

Even En's hand gestures were less confusing than the instructor hiding behind the screen. In what is known as RP, or received pronunciation, or the highest standard for British English, the female voice in a posh accent went: "The limit is—" We were obedient, of course, and willingly directed. To the flailing and lost, even misguidance is a form of salvation. Such were our lifelong entanglements with England.

The single and dual carriageways have their own speed limits, the country roads varied in theirs. It's difficult to keep up with the signs and drive on roads without proper lines. More difficult to look out for them when there's ice on the windscreen and when driving through unlit roads. We relied on the GPS for a history of the tried-and-tested roads, the less travelled roads. The odograph corresponded with numbers that were supposed to mean something. Roads unbeknown to us brought En and me to the town of her favourite ballad.

In Scarborough, though, there was no traditional fair. There might have been one in the 1600s that sold fresh herbs and cambric shirts. Today it has shed its glory. The bathing houses were drained and long gone. The sea remains, but the people are few.

Finding no fair, we walked through the windy ginnels of its old town. Out of pity, we tried our hand at a forlorn amusement arcade whose blinding lights and neon displays flashed for a

handful of people. Though we failed at the teddy picker, we scored at the penny drop machine. I must have clasped the coins in my hand for too long; they left a metallic, musty smell that lingered throughout the day. I wondered why the English penny stank more than the Singaporean dollar.

As we were exiting the arcade, my ungloved hand slipped out of my pocket and some coins got away. When they fell to the ground, the uneven surface of the cobblestone pavement amplified the noise and awakened the sleeping homeless man, who had assumed it was a generous donation. We gave him all that touched the ground.

Annoyed by my carelessness and the brisk winds, En marched on, turning the corner and walking up onto Quay Street. It must have been almost five minutes before she returned into my view.

"Why is every walk uphill with you?" she said, turning around to find me a few steps behind, still at the bottom of the street. I was admiring the boiled sweets and bonbons on display in Mrs Bradley's Confectionery. She asked again, almost shouting, so maybe the abandoned town would hear her. Stealthily I took a couple of pictures of the storefront before catching up.

En walked on until she found a comfortable spot to wait. Leaning against the door of a green-brick building, she put her backpack down and drew out the vape pen. It hadn't lost its shine, the fire-engine red visible from afar. En was tapping her feet to an unknown melody. Signs of impatience I had learned from three years of living together. Her other hand was searching

without urgency for the vape juice that was in my pocket. The empty vape pen settled comfortably between her slender fingers.

In my viewfinder she slipped into the street scene with flags. I was taught in school that every work of art requires documentation: title of artwork, date, artist's name, dimensions, medium, credit line and so on. This was a street scene. *Girl Standing in the Middle of a Well-Used Cobbled Thoroughfare with Flags*. After Manet's *La Rue Mosnier aux drapeaux*.

In this part of the town, the cobblestones set in mortar have not been replaced by granite yet. It's the same street traversed by horse hoofs and carriage wheels in Victorian times. Antique shops and blue heritage plaques along the way vouch for the history of Quay Street. It must have tripped up drunken lads, lads with wooden legs after returning from the first war. It must have seen its fair share of flappers who ditched bedroom slippers for dancing heels. It might have seen Clare, her every step as determined as the free men and women. En and I were determined too, albeit in a transition of our own: I was fresh out of university, prepared to face the world of education with my pen and ruler, though I was rather certain that hitting the hands of children was no longer allowed in primary school. En had graduated too and had fallen out of love, ready to fall for another.

We were waiting for the best version of ourselves to emerge after graduation, after a break-up, after a loss. Six months of summer research in pedagogy had purged the extra weight put on from a year of late-night studying and eating mostly chips and

gravy. With her mother's aid, En managed to prolong her stay in London until winter. The deal was she would return to work in the family business forever. She had lost weight too, without her anger towards Petty Patsy, whom she had left behind in Lancaster just a couple of days ago. They had broken up thrice, and this time it was for real. We had made the trip to Lancaster so En could leave Patsy the bags of clothes—a definite sign of finality between them. If En stopped wearing her clothes and her scent, then Patsy was surely out of her life.

This road trip was part of our final two weeks in this country. We were ready to leave Europe. Our visas were expiring. The United Kingdom too had decided to leave larger Europe a few months ago.

I moved out of Sands End in June. I was due to start summer research training with a professor who had managed to secure housing for me. As much as I wanted to stay, I could not refuse a decent, subsidised studio apartment in Holborn. It would be silly to pass up the opportunity to live so close to school and right in the heart of London. En left too, though she held out for another month before moving in with Janine, her rebound girlfriend, to some neighbourhood in Shepherd's Bush. We weren't sentimental about moving out. No mushy goodbyes or hugs. Just a few texts back and forth.

When the day came, I dragged my suitcases to the door and left the keys on the shoe rack. My gaze lingered on the wall of memories. I removed the photograph of the three of us on a

carousel, holding churros in our hands. *Winter Wonderland, Hyde Park 2014*. Later in the night, I texted En to say thanks for everything and that I was sorry to have taken the Polaroid photograph on the wall without permission. She texted back to say she was leaving too. She said to stay warm and take care. I wanted to tell her that it was summer, that she should hydrate and take care too. I was tempted to say that we should stay in touch, but someone had to pull the plug. After a few more messages, I ended the desultory conversation with an angel emoji.

I think we both must have anticipated that as the seasons changed, the unsaid feelings would catch up with us. Summer was all right. Autumn was pretty manageable. Then it was almost winter, and the days dragged on. I had drafted messages and deleted them, came so close to sending a cliché but pulled back just in time, the angel emoji taunting me.

If it were not for En, I would never have realised that asking after someone was really quite a simple thing to do. All she said was, “Test.” And I replied, “Hey!” Then she said, “It’s been fucking cold. How’s London treating you?” To which I responded, “Shitty. How’s London for you?” She texted to say it’s awful as usual. That the weather sucks. I might have changed the topic if she hadn’t sent another message: “Want to get out?” I said yes without hesitation, knowing exactly where she had in mind. A week later we found ourselves in a café, plotting our itinerary and figuring out how to rent a car. A week after that, we were on Quay Street in Scarborough, trying to find

something to like about the town.

On Quay Street, the flags were swaying, left to right, left to right. Right, right, right. Scarborough is many shades of blue: the good is South Bay, the not so good is the Tories. Things in between are the blue-collar workers, seafaring, the aquarium, the old bathing pool, En’s navy coat, her Cochrane azure scarf. She blended into the palette. A funky urban blue, the good kind of blue.

An old man with gnarly teeth passed by as I was cleaning the lens of my camera.

“You’re aight, pet?” he said.

“All right, thanks,” I said. I imagined Emily, Anne and Charlotte walking the streets and getting called “pet”. I laughed to myself.

The old man smiled back, hiding his teeth. “Take care, pet.”

I saw him walk up the street and stop near where En was standing. They exchanged a few sentences I could not hear. The old man waved back to me, then to En, and walked into the vanishing point. En shrugged to say she thought the man was amusing too. Then she gave me a look that meant *stop dallying*.

“Give me,” she said when I sidled up to her. Instinctively, I reached into my pocket for the unopened bottle of vape liquid. There was no vanilla, so we bought caramel instead.

“Why were you taking your own sweet time? Nothing much to see what.”

En waved the pen at me for a refill. She leaned in as I took the bottle cap off. A whiff of burnt sugar filled the air.

After one or two inhalations, En put down the pen for a moment and the smoke encircled us.

“Why are we here, Gigi?” En said. “It’s a dead town.”

“Road-tripping, sightseeing. I thought that’s the plan.”

Driving was the point, I thought. To drive and trace those final days. Maybe we’d find an alley, a monument. Something that made sense.

“I’m just not sure what’s there to see.”

I shrugged. “There’s some life, you know.”

“If you mean old uncles and old buildings...”

“What’s wrong with that?”

En didn’t bother to defend herself. She sucked hard on the vape pen, exhaled and took a step forth into the dissipating puff.

Without saying it, we knew in our hearts that this was the sort of place Clare would’ve liked. Slow and reeking of nostalgia, even if she never knew this place. I turned to En, and our eyes met for a few seconds before I looked down at my shoes.

Perhaps sensing a vulnerability, En said: “Let’s get out of here.”

I rested my hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently against the wall.

“Stay still. This is a good shot.”

There must be a language that could describe what we were going through, why we were driving to the sea in winter. Something from a Hallmark card or BuzzFeed quiz, or one of those pseudo-psychology websites. But there wasn’t much useful stuff out there. Not a single adequate checklist or listicle of

steps that offered real comfort. Much like death, grief is a silent business. Sobs and choking sounds, that was it. No language for a death that had no funeral, no body, no reason.

I’d wondered how older people did it: play games on their phones and eat pumpkin seeds at funerals, sleep and go to work, send their kids to school, falling back on familiar routines. I thought it’s a skill one acquired with age, that without such maturity we would fall apart and indulge in our feelings; but En and I, too, did not confront the nature of our behaviour. We thought that being quiet about things made our dealings with death a little more honest. Silence was a vigil, we agreed. A tacit understanding between two people could form a language. Maybe two white lies could make a truth as two negatives multiply to make a positive. Such was the power of the smallest plurality. Two are better than one, like Clare always said—a premonitory extrication of herself from us. Truly, the two of us were never closer than we were in the aftermath of what had happened. What united En and me was the mission to keep Clare between us. It was never about letting her go. We worked together to fend off any honest conversation. We stopped talking about it.

En was cooperative, naturally poised. The vape pen was sitting still between her fingers. It should have taken me a second to press the shutter button, but I struggled to place her in the scene. A medium shot or close-up? I paused a moment and walked two steps backwards. I adjusted the dial and took the photograph.

“Why is there so much background?” she asked sharply,

Three Singaporean university students in London, as unlike as can be, become roommates and then fast friends.

Over three winters in the mid-2010s, Gigi, Yi-En and Clare rely on each other in the face of trauma and big, scary life changes. When news comes of Clare's disappearance, Gigi and En take a road trip to the countryside to retrace the path of her final days. *What We Learned From Driving in Winter* explores how to live with tragedy with a little help from friends.

FICTION

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