

The Middle of Somewhere

By 1975, Jen and Steven were married. Nothing fancy, just family and friends at the local church. Jen's mother had even splurged on a peppermint-green Rolls Royce, although the exhaust rattled and the engine made the seats shake.

Steven had completed his Diploma of Aviation in 1972, and by the time of their marriage in December 1974 he'd been at Tullamarine for two years. Jen found a job in Belgrave the year after, receptionist to an air-conditioning company, and was about to quit on account of the long drive when Steven had received a call from Perth.

A career opportunity.

Steven and Jen flew over, business class, in a 727. Two nights at the Sheraton, some swanky new hotel in the CBD, with minibar, drinks, and breakfast included.

No mention of shifts, or the adaptation to new streets, and smaller malls; a city not yet visited, let alone inhabited by the Slater family. They'd arrived in Western Australia the way most did, unsure of whether they were at an airport or an aircraft hangar. They had taken one of the three cabs in the rank, the driver only kicking into action once they'd visibly lifted their suitcases towards the boot. They vowed to see something of the city, preferably in the shade, given it was only mid-December but thirty-two degrees and headed for a late afternoon peak of thirty-four.

With interview completed, and a shower and change of clothes, they had found Kings Park, a sprawling mass of green that cloaked a cliff to the west of Perth's CBD. Steven dressed, as always, in pressed navy trousers and a sky-blue business shirt; Jen in a green and white summer dress, cape-collared, that bumped at the breasts and bulged at the belly. She wasn't very comfortable but was damned if she was going to travel to a place like Perth and dress as though she was in Melbourne, with its morning chill and windswept laneways, refusing sun, as though to let it in would be distinctly un-Victorian.

Lanes of cars coasted north and south on the freeway. What appeared to Jen as a Tolkien-like valley in old photographs had in time been overtaken by lights, roads, and office blocks. The buildings like Lego—tubby, flattened thumbs held up on the horizon. The river spilling out,

centre stage, ripples emerging every now and then from the shadows, a blanket of black stretching the gap between north and south.

Steven had brought along two pies, a bottle of white, two plastic glasses, and a corkscrew. No napkins or cutlery. No plates, either. *A man's picnic*, she thought, as he emptied the bag. She appreciated the thought as she'd appreciated his other little quirks: petals on the bed with each anniversary; the care with which he entered her when making love, as though prolonging every second.

'We should make out,' said Steven.

'You'd love that, wouldn't you?' said Jen.

He nodded, smiling. 'You would too. You think I don't know why you brought me here?'

For a second she felt drunk on love. Happy, hopeful they were doing this together. She reached for his hand and he squeezed hers twice, but then his grip loosened, and it seemed he was thinking about something else: a möbius strip of past and present, with neither gaining traction.

A mosquito landed on her leg and she shooed it away, her stockings too tight, her jacket zip stretched near the belly. *Moon Jen*, she thought, *swallowed a beachball*.

She took a bite of her pie. Swallowed twice to get it down. Remembered that at primary school, they had found a piece of pigskin in a steak and mushroom pie; a pink, rubbery flap, with fine golden hairs on one side, baby smooth on the other. She felt sick. Put down the bag,

pushed it to Steven, who took a bite, and then another, and soon enough he was on to his second.

Every so often a light, warm breeze rustled through. To the east a full, heavy moon touched the hills.

Jen took her husband's arm, draped it over her shoulder, kissed the back of his hand. A midge landed nearby. Steven kicked, his foot flailing. The midge flew up for a moment and then landed again. He kicked it again, and it flew away.

'You like Kings Park?' said Steven. 'Could be our new hangout?'

'Let's see if you get the job first, hey?' said Jen.

'We're out west. You afraid?'

'Of what?'

'Drop bears. They prey on virgins.'

'I should be all right then,' said Jen.

Should be, would be, although none of that was thanks to Steven. She had come to expect his state of chaos: the need to be on call, the shift that could come at any time with news or opportunity. He had only added to the maelstrom; had researched blue-chip western suburbs in Perth, drawn up comparisons on graph paper. Chose Mount Lawley in the end because it was closer to the city, and near enough to the airport for the commute to be manageable.

'It's weird,' said Jen.

'What?'

‘Perth. It’s like an island. Australia’s shed, down the back of the garden.’

‘You going to be okay?’ he said. ‘To up and move?’

‘We’ve come for the interview. For now, that’s enough.’

‘What if I get the job?’

I’ll be happy. I’ll be scared. Glad to be leaving Mum. Sad to be leaving Melbourne. I’ll need you. You’ll need to keep close, say it’s going to be okay.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, and breathed out, a gentle pulse in her lips at the sudden release of air. She exhaled again to relive the sensation, her mouth only slightly open.

An opportunity, thought Jen. A place unburdened by emotional baggage. A town playing grown-ups, with a river that split the centre like a giant sinkhole, only pretty, that slick of a sinkhole, so long as you wanted to fish its depths, sail the surface, or jog its perimeter.

Not a bad get, all told, but miles away, and isolated. The place was hotter too, bigger in some respects and yet small at the same time. More a town than a capital city, and rough at that. They’d had the misfortune of walking down the wrong side of Barrack and things quickly went downhill. Hoots and hollers from Ziggy’s, Friday afternoon skimpies, and a woman at the No. 60 bus stop sipping slowly—and, it seemed, a bit painfully—on something purple in an old lemonade bottle.

‘This is home,’ said Steven.

‘Maybe,’ said Jen.

‘What’s going to sell it? We’ll get a bigger house, and it’s much quieter. Never have to trek Sydney Road again. Imagine that.’

And she did, but she wasn’t that excited.

‘I’ll work part-time, if we need it,’ Jen said.

He motioned to her belly, a slight but deliberate glance.

‘I can still work, Steven.’ Jen said.

‘We’ll see,’ he said in a soothing voice, although she felt patronised. As though, with every ‘we’ he meant ‘he,’ and by ‘see’ he meant to never again discuss her working life.

He reached for her belly bump. ‘I love you.’

‘I know.’

He moved closer. Rested his palm on her stomach. Drew a heart with his index finger. She gently caressed his hand, and soon enough she could barely recall the ways in which she felt hemmed in, or restricted.

‘How are you feeling?’ she said.

‘About Perth?’

‘About *this*,’ she said, patting her belly.

‘Great,’ said Steven, smoothing the rug. ‘You?’

‘Great,’ she echoed. She waited for a follow-up question, but he let it go.

She was not sure if he was tired, stressed, or maybe both. Whether, in those sighs and silences she was seeing a sunken intensity that would flare up when things got too much or the tasks too many for him.

She had planned to tell him in the car that she was terrified of the move, and maybe it was all too soon. That it wouldn't have to be forever, but right now they were having a baby, which was more than enough to worry about. She baulked, of course. How did you tell your husband such things? When was it anxiety and when were you simply sharing your thoughts and fears with the man you love in the hope that he might hear them?

‘Can we go for a walk?’ said Jen.

‘Sure.’ He picked her up from the rug, strained for a second. They shoved their things into the bag and walked on, the city shifting into view. Down to the war memorial, feeling naked in the throng of people, tourists with cameras, framing and reframing the night-time cityscape. They found the last spot on the rail.

Jen felt shadowed by the giant monument, clouds drifting down as if preparing for a storm. ‘We’re having a baby.’

Steven rested his hand on her belly, traced semi-circular motions with the tips of his fingers. ‘How are you holding up?’

‘I’m a bit scared.’

‘I know,’ said Steven. ‘But we’ll be okay.’

They kept walking. Down the edge of the park. The trees thinning. The river, spreading out, almost a lake, as houses and units shone like tea lights.

A gazebo appeared at the point where the path dipped down. Her feet already ached, the extra weight tightening

her lower back. She wanted to be close, thinking maybe it would crack him open, spilling out thoughts and fears.

‘Take a break?’

‘Oh,’ said Steven. ‘Absolutely.’ He laid the blanket down, helped her to the ground. He remained standing and watched, as though assessing danger.

She pulled at his trouser leg. ‘What are you looking at?’

‘Cumulus clouds,’ said Steven. ‘Loose formation.’

‘I have a loose formation that needs some attention,’ said Jen. She zipped open her jacket and plumped up her cleavage.

Steven smiled and went down on his knees. He was about to open Jen’s blouse when she clasped his fingers.

‘Remember our first date?’ said Jen.

‘No,’ said Steven.

‘You do,’ she said, smiling.

‘I do,’ he said. ‘You think I’d forget that?’

She had worn a green tube top and jeans. A scarf with sparkles in the fabric, hoping maybe she could shimmer, diamond shine.

‘It was nice,’ said Steven. ‘Almost too nice.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Jen.

‘I wasn’t sure it could last. That things could stay that good.’

‘Lucky you stuck it out,’ said Jen. She kissed her husband, her nose knocking his glasses off kilter.

So lucky, she thought, as though the very idea would implode if spoken, a mantra she'd embrace when nights were long, or when fear took over.

He slipped her dress off her shoulders, nuzzled her breastbone. She took his shirt off button by button, kissed his centre line from neck to navel, her nose tickling his chest on the way.

'I'm not sure I have this sex thing right,' he said. 'Can we give it another try?'

She nodded. Undid his belt and zipper, slipped his jeans off, leg by leg. She grinned, crawled up, placed her palms upon his shoulders.

She bent over, hair draped over his rib cage, dipping down to kiss his belly, higher, higher, until reaching his lips. Steven pulled at her dress. A shoulder came down, exposing her breast. He went to grab it, but she slapped his hand. She tugged at his underpants, slid them down to his ankles.

She started slow, rocking back and forth, occasionally shifting her weight left then right. Spread her hands across his chest, tightening her grip. Thrust up and down, locked upon a single word. *Together. Together. Together. Together.*

The bub kicked in her belly and she wondered if, despite her joy, she had made an unconscionably selfish choice: rocking, fucking, longing, all at once. Threw away her guilt, cursed herself for thinking such things. Put the thought in a bubble, popped it with a thrust, and another,

thoughts coming, gone, body flooded, tingling in a moment of release, and still her mother's voice, persistent, loud. *You're so selfish, Jen. I don't like selfish people.*

But families are selfish. They're mums, dads, kids. Together.

She came hard. Shuddered twice and then stretched, as though eking out the last ounce of pleasure. Lifted her leg, rolled onto the rug. Lay beside him, twirling his hair in her fingers. They turned to each other and, for a moment, were silent.

'That was nice,' said Jen.

'You sound surprised,' said Steven.

'No, it's just, well, work, and with Alex on the way. We've let it slip a bit.'

'Who's Alex?' said Steven.

'I thought we could call him that,' she said. 'You don't like it?'

'I love it. What's his middle name?'

'There's plenty of time to work that out,' said Jen, feeling foolish, hopeful, frightened. 'Cuddle me.'

He cuddled her, and she liked the way he gave in to the cuddle, hoping one day she could be like that, thoughts thrown out to the wind, eyes closed, feeling love, or something like it.