

East of Vanity Town

David was lying, half on his side with the rib cage pushed up slightly, accommodating against the mattress. He lay facing the wall, his back turned against the door, there was an unusual geometry to the room, the corners are intersected, and the windows sit in their own alcove, a blunted triangle that pushed out into the yard. It probably wasn't a room that was designed for sleeping in so there is no obvious place to put the bed, though this doesn't affect its hospitality. Unlike the subsidised apartments in new developments, designed into the abscess' of the building, next to the generator room, or around the emergency stairs, anywhere that will narrowly qualify for the state conditions of a residence and a place to live for basically anybody. David had visited many of these apartments a few months ago when he was desperate for somewhere to live, somewhere without other people around and that would accept his faked rental credentials. In those apartments you could feel the passive aggressive afterthought that had devised the room, as soon as you swiped the card that you borrowed from the superintendent in the basement, and stood in the elevator, the elevator that contained the smell and humidity of an insulated backpack designed to carry takeaway meals, as soon as you walked down the hallway hearing rarely exchanging human voices but always recorded ones, with nikes in the door to keep them open, the smell of pizza and instant noodles or richly seasoned lamb curry, with stains on the carpet, cats peeking out through the thick recirculated air, beneath fluorescent panels who's suicidal hum you could hear in your skull, lime green wall panels abstracting brightly down the sides, as soon as you walked in.

The ceilings were low, the windows ran on rubber gutters and looked out directly across at another building, the sister to the one with the available room. Both buildings sat reflecting each other, in a literal way, they had highly reflective windows, stained by the exhaust from the cars 23 floors down and from the air traffic 12 kilometres above, but they also behaved reflectively. The general shabiness of the interiors and fittings was offset by acrylic, matte, vibrant white wall paint. A colour and paint quality that imitated the blue white of an LED screen and which touched the eye in the same way, it woke you up, it kept you awake, it kept you alert, it helped you concentrate on your emails, when you sat at night watching Netflix in your bed, it picked up the glow that managed to escape from around the screen and threw it against the wall, it was a place to work and it was easy to clean, it was a place where you could concentrate on yourself and what was important, where you could focus and hustle.

The acrylic quality of the paint also contributed to this sensation of being thrown back. Whereas the enamel and emulsion paint previously used for architecture and infrastructure had a quality of depth, of layers of varying opacity, a plane of colour not exactly consistent but which nonetheless allowed the eye to pass over and slightly within, the highly plastic matte allowed no such access. It fairly glowed, throwing into relief any furniture that was placed in front of it, and rising through the ranks of the room to become its own predominant force. When you entered the primary focus was the upper half, the weight of significance began at waist height and pooled around the head. This allowed David to feel the whole weight of the building, and in this way he could conjure up each apartment above and below him, this was a reminder not of reassuring companionship or community but competition and the spectre of replacement.

The bed was low to the ground, a hardwood frame that was collapsible and easily transported, it locked into place with steel screws, some of them missing and when it was bare of a mattress it was a trap, daring anyone to come close enough to trip or be pulled inside while it folded up around you. But with a mattress it was placated and lay calmly. While David lay there, scrolling on the computer, this bed was something that was utterly tied to him, the horizontal pose of the activity was if not informed by this furniture then at least necessarily braided around it. The bedroom was arranged asymmetrically with the bed pushed to the edge and a great vacancy beside it, this organisation sought to de-emphasise the activities of the bed, scrolling and sleeping, but since there was nothing else to indicate much happening otherwise the room did not have a counterweight of action.

On the screen were the career listings for large tech companies, they used emojis in the summary of what qualifications a suitable candidate would have, described the legal department as ninjas and used the word f*****. The casualness of the language betrayed an exacting impenetrability, he could barely conceive of how you would apply for these jobs, let alone possess the massive amount of schooling, interning and social backgrounding that would have been necessarily started almost half his life ago. The distance between who he was as he lay there and who he would have to be as he lay looking was a journey that was completely forbidden, he stood at its gates and with a stretch felt the impassibility pass through his various limbs. As the foreclosure travelled through his muscles and bones he curled slightly more inwards, and inversely the room became slightly bigger.

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David was sitting with her on a train as it passed through the outer suburbs, the elevated tracks allowing him to see out over the houses to the sun as it burned and set. He could remember reading about the feeling that came when you passed by hundreds of unknown lives, each individual industriously producing its own story and space, and the dizzying opacity of trying to apprehend what even one of them was doing.

The other passengers were commuters, and if they were heading towards the city at the end of the day it meant that they had jobs on an opposite side of the central business district than where they lived, their commute was long and they passed from one quiet residential area through the high rises and main stations back to another grotto. Their journey made no real sense. Its daily hours represented a total failure in city planning and this catastrophe was soaked into their faces. But this exhaustion did not infect David or the girl he was with, in fact it did the opposite, they were not working, whatever they were actually doing they were barely even doing that. And the hours these people kept had no meaning for them, they may as well have lived in different worlds.

So David continued to stare out over the houses, letting the ambiguity of their residents mingle with the people sitting beside, whilst the boundary around him and the girl clarified everything within it. Their clothes became so much more luminous, his levi's, cheap tweed blazer, her pleated skirt and white scrunchy. All of this lay directly in front of his sight, completely arresting, she had been talking to him and he managed to answer in a way that didn't interrupt the cadence of the conversation but it was all that he could do to not let his head be carried back by the blinding vitality. While he struggled to keep his chin from raising towards the ceiling he gripped the nylon shag of the seat coverings, he knew that both the pattern and the fabric was designed so that it would absorb the filth and dust without needing frequent cleaning, and that if

you hit it with the flat of your hand a cloud of particles bellowed out, dead skin, food and paper, metal shavings, congealed beer, speed, everything everyday. He wondered if the other passengers could tell how different they were to him and this girl, or if it was obvious in his face and body language that he considered there to be such a massive divide, that to David they looked like ghosts.

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He went to some of the older tabs in his browser, these were for searches about what it was like to be a commercial pilot. David's notion of this job was one of independence, an alienated life and career but one in which the alienation was integral and not merely made acceptable by the benefits, high paychecks, mid level hotel rooms, f***** different girlfriends in Chicago and Vietnam. This removal from social life and the ceasing of a possibility of family produced a structure in which these perks took on a whole new meaning, they were not hedonistic but casual, without the ruptures in time that bingeing or cheating produced, totally weaved into a life of movement and backgrounds, HSBC ads alongside airport travelators, tasteless food, whiskey and xanax, kindles and The Economist.

At this point it didn't matter if your apartment resembled a hotel, you lived in a hotel anyway, you were born in a hotel, for what was life before this job anyway, you were in 7 different countries each week but you saw the same 100 or so faces. Could you remember the faces of people you went to highschool with, what country was that even in, the same one you were born in? Or perhaps you were a military brat, moved and moved and moved.

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He knew that he should always strive for what was best, that his heart was a torch and that it illuminated all it touched in a field of conflict and that the shadows of death which leapt forth were a contour, a map such that his eyes could land upon life and attempt to call it home. As the page loaded David looked around and reflected on how the room had taken on novel definitions as the months passed, honeymoon, funeral, halfway house. This all passed and gave way to the new and outside the freeway thundered on, trucks filled with livestock and refuse, ubers and lyfts, hearses, airport buses, confused and perverted pedestrians. Every week there was a new eviction, either from the semi detached houses that were rented out to students at a half again the market price or the airbnb's for meth heads to party in, each expulsion left a mound of sheets and clothing in the street. They were impermanent so someone cleaned them up but David had never seen who, just alternating heaps of hoodies, underwear and sheets that slowly melted in the rain. All this putrid waste, somehow a world that had been returned to the 17th century, with sewerage thrown from windows and where peace lived only in the heavens, a web of thought from soul to soul that arced upwards, lightning in reverse, splitting open the sky and drowning out thought in a final response to the question asked.

- Calum Lockey