

— standing on the edge

I was drifting, along grey and overly sanitised corridors lined with faded Monet prints, when my attention was caught by the slender figure of a young woman perched on a chair inside a narrow room. Intrigued by the way she was positioning herself, I stopped a few metres away from the doorway. Her back to the partially open door, she planted one foot securely on each armrest, brought her elbows to her knees, and clasped her hands under her chin. Breathing out fully, she began to hum, almost prayer-like, before relaxing into a silent, motionless pose. I edged forward. She nodded very slowly, lifting her head up then down then up again. Moving closer, I craned my neck over the threshold and peered into the room.

Without turning, she raised her hand, extended her index finger—which did a little dance like a caterpillar crawling along the underside of a leaf—and beckoned me into her cell.

‘Don’t fall,’ were the first cautious words I spoke to her.

‘Oh, I won’t fall,’ she replied, ‘I never fall.’

All our encounters have been just like that—spontaneous, bordering on bizarre. She has a way of disturbing normality, to the point that I believe nothing will ever be normal for me again. 28 is a woman with a number for a name; that in itself is strange, but it may well prove to be the least of her eccentricities. On the first day that we met, she insisted that her existence amounted to nothing. I am beginning to realise she represents both nothing and everything. Her beginnings are endless, and her endings have no beginnings. She lives in the moment; yet, through every breath, her soul conveys the entire history of humankind.

I am compelled to turn to writing for the first time in my life to untangle the mess of confusion and disillusion I find myself in. I'm learning to salvage dignity from scattered uncertainties. It was 28's idea to start this journal. 'Recording your thoughts may be therapeutic,' she said. The words on these pages are more a composition of her words and her thoughts rather than my own, and not always conveyed as eloquently and accurately as they deserve to be, but they offer a means to my liberation, so I value them and record them as faithfully as I can. When I have the courage, perhaps I will write about my son: it is Andre, lying in a bed, in the same hospital as 28, who really needs my attention. If I thought that anything I wrote here would honestly help him, I would begin now and never stop. For the moment I will stick to writing about 28. I will attempt to describe her—her appearance, her complex manner, her speech, her mode of communication. Although, to completely define her would be an impossible task: I lack the necessary devices; I am a novice at all this. I will try to reconstruct her phrases, try to recall her stories as she conveyed them to me. Something like this:

Standing on the edge. High above it all. Toes twitching in the hollow breeze. Trying to detach, trying to unhook the last rusty barbs of soullessness from my skin. Buildings, confine and constrict, like a boa at your neck. Amazing. Chilling. Many people below—tiny labyrinthine creatures searching for exits, and hoping that the way out is a way in, an invitation to something new. But the realisation, it comes like a sharp smack in the face with a cold hand. After the blow, all and nothing at the same time. Then a silent lonely quiver. Reality is a gaze into nothingness. Oh, to glide into the blackness of that abyss, to turn at will, dive and spin, and then to accelerate, soaring upward in total control, rising above the man-made maze and the man-made mess. But for what? Another new beginning? Better, perhaps, to drop, plummeting, limp and lifeless, into that black hole, spiralling downward, wingless, with no desire left to flap ...

They were my last thoughts before I awoke in this hospital. I had been standing on the edge.

It was a long climb—twenty-eight flights of stairs. Twenty-eight years. Twenty-eight flights. Twenty-eight years sounds so insignificant, so easy to write off. We should count our lives in days, not years. Ten thousand two hundred and twenty-two days—including leap years—of looking at the same face in the mirror. The gradual disintegration, in the pores of your skin and in your eyes, goes unnoticed. Ten thousand two hundred and twenty-two days, only to find ... No shout to be heard. No monument erected in honour of your existence.

I tried to be like other women, even tried to be like my mother. But none of that came naturally for me. I toyed at

being like men, studying them, acting like them—they are sometimes easier to understand. But there was no common ground for me there either, nowhere to settle my self, nowhere to bed down for the night. It was like trying to stay underwater when you needed to come up for air. I was lost in many ways, without soul, without mind. Spiritless. But all I wanted was to be lost with everyone else: then I would feel the comfort of belonging. To be part of a tribe, any tribe, was what I yearned for, even if it was a lost tribe—just to be a part. I wanted to feel their displacement with them, their grief, even their guilt. Instead, step-by-step, day-by-day, year-after-year, my own personal exile swelled and consumed me. I had become an alien in my own land. I wanted to escape. I wanted desperately to jump. ■

She paused for a very long time, almost trancelike. I was uncertain how to act, not sure whether she was waiting for me to comment or if I had offended her in some way. I thought about prodding her, or calling a nurse, or just quietly slipping away. Then suddenly she took a small plastic bag from her lap and offered its contents to me—jellybeans. After hesitating, I chose a red one and a yellow one. She said that a nurse had given them to her, in an attempt to encourage her to eat.

‘I’m in no hurry to fill my belly,’ she said, shaking the bag in front of me. ‘Going without food is the best way to clear one’s mind.’

I chewed alone, silently, like a child with a pacifier. Jellybeans of all things, my son’s favourite treat. The sweetness and the colours began blending with my childhood memories.

Nothing as colourful as the jellybeans, though. Most of my relatives and their friends were tradesmen or farmers, with the odd restaurateur, and one accountant. Even though I had both the ability and inclination to go further with study, it was not encouraged. I still dabble, still have a few personal interests, like architecture and structural design, but carpentry is my trade, and I have become respected as a cabinet-maker. I find time to read often enough—manuals, magazines, and newspapers, even the occasional novel if the story is to my liking.

Most nights, as I am arranging the words on these pages, a dictionary is necessary for support, in more ways than one: beneath a solitary lamp I sit at my desk; my old, language-fattened lexicon close by—either propped under my left elbow preventing me from toppling sideways into sleep, or else pinned down to my right with its binding splitting at the seams as I flick through its aging pages, searching, often in a vain attempt, for the appropriate words to convey 28’s style and her distinctive, often feisty, tone.

I am concerned that my interpretation may consist more of betrayal than portrayal. With so much confusion in my life—unable to reconstruct even the most simple and recent events—I question whether I have the ability to assemble and disseminate the words and ideas of someone else, someone so ...

28

If I were stronger and a bit meaner, I’d have bullied my way through the world out there instead of taking flight. I took flight because of fright. A little downtown sojourn took me up twenty-eight flights of stairs inside a building that I entered

in the same way that I entered this world—agoraphobically, with a silent gaping mouth, a tight chest, and a few hesitant, sharp, shallow breaths. Panic stricken, I headed for safety, only to reel as the damp, stale odour of the concrete stairwell filled my nostrils. I stumbled, fell to my knees and crawled until I reached the first level, my senses gradually reawakening. I had arrived in the sandpit of life—just as I had done at birth.

If I try hard enough, I can almost touch the sand now, feel my fingers raking through the grains. Hmm, I wonder how accurate my mind's images are. Are we ever really able to recall the forgotten, or do we construct a collage of arbitrary images, a random amalgam from different times and events, even from other people's lives? I have no right to claim ownership of that little girl I now recall. No right to claim that moment as my own. Who was she, that toddler playing in a sandpit?

It is a good place to begin, that sandpit. I met a dribbler there. He was a tyrannical sand merchant, an overfed three- or four-year-old megalomaniac with chubby little fingers and toes that no light had ever shone between. He over-salivated, and continually sucked the drool back in and out between his lips just for fun. When he took control of the sandpit you could see that he felt exceedingly proud of himself, so much so that his podgy little bulbous crimson cheeks puffed out and almost completely buried his nose. His face looked like a new born baby's buttocks with a pea wedged between them. He disliked me, resented my younger, more carefree ways. But I was proud to be aged one—crawlin', and a kickin', and a pullin' everything down around me. Crawling around was my personal mode of transport, my freedom. The dribbling, little, chubby megalomaniac who never let me play in the sand was

chauffeured around in a high-tech, three-wheeled, carbon-graphite space-shuttle. 'This is my domain,' he would shout from the sand, although perhaps not quite in those words. Then he would beat his chest, and thump the ground. 'Gruff!'

I, on the other hand, was a sensitive, understanding, new-age kind of kid with curls; and overalls; and a sun hat; and a charming smile—with dimples. Oh, and I never wet my disposable nappies, not intentionally anyway; I was trying desperately to get out of that habit: it weighed me down, and took up precious time. How shameful, lying flat on your back and being hoisted up and down by your ankles—washed, wiped, lubricated, and repackaged into a miniature Sumo wrestler. Because of my caring and somewhat inquisitive disposition, I began thinking more and more about that dribbler who, day after day, built his empires in the sand. 'What is he so afraid of, that he needs to be in control, hoarding all the real estate and equipment like that? And where did his fear come from? Was he born that way?' Fear is a great motivator. And a powerful eraser.

I didn't have the answers back then. Not any of those in-your-head kind of answers. More an instinctual response to the situation. I destroyed one or two of his bridges and roads—at least I think I did. It happened so long ago. If in reality I didn't, then I should have, so I will now. I'll have a good kick. There, I feel better. I was just a baby at that stage, wanting to play and make friends. I didn't know the rules. I didn't know that his goal was to build build build, ever faster and ever higher. And anyway, in my opinion, his building ability was second-rate, structurally inept. He didn't even use the right tools. Me, I wanted to enjoy the texture of the sand, sprinkle it and spread it, carry it around in my creases. Yes, maybe I did unintentionally

mash the occasional castle under my heels, or spear the odd house with my toes as I pivoted on my sand-filled nappy—so to him I was just a crazy, destructive mashing-machine—but I was expressing my freedom and experiencing the nature of sand. I was doing my own creating, spreading the grains randomly, letting them form their own arbitrary landscape. And I wanted to share the sand with everyone. ■

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