

Reality Check

(a short fiction in the spirit of the ten-foot-square hut, and humming with universal resonance)



The snow fell outside but in, inside it was warm. Warm from the heat of the crackling wood stove, warm from the glow of two dozen candles, warm from the feel of contented limbs and cosy hugs. Him of her and her of him. For he had just returned, crawled back into the cocoon of their silent existence, the one in which souls could be heard breathing in time with the rhythm of the world, in time with the ancient metronome of the earth.

He had returned that day after many of being away, attending to things, workaday things, professional things. The snow and the storms had delayed his return. And guests she had entertained alone because of this delay missed his easy laughter and warm smile, his generosity of spirit. Still, she had sought to compensate for his absence and, indeed, their approach so alike – a case of same, same, but different – such was the joy to invite others to share their hearth. Their life so twinned it had not really mattered, in the end, that he could not be present. However disappointing. For him. For her. Disappointing but nought else.

Easily relieved, this feeling. For it was not admixed with any ancillary emotion such as guilt or fear or envy, or any other of the seven sins. It was OK, Zen-like in its simplicity, these emotions they felt and expressed, and as she held and kissed away the fatigue from his face, she smiled into the familiar, almost tangible expulsion of air that announced his release. Release from the everyday, and return to the peace, tranquillity, harmony and silence of their own singular world.

Once those breaths were taken or, rather, made, heaved-ho (and yes, sometimes it took several such breaths, generating a hum from deep within that even the wind's resonance through thick forest could not definitively describe), it was as if all tension had departed his form. Something which never ceased to amaze her – this phenomenon – to shed a tear of joy at hearing the stale energy leave of the outer world his body. Shed as snake skin, returned to the source. The effect of their love, their life, likewise energised her soul, but at this moment, much as she dwelt on the thought, she could not pinpoint how this was expressed as clearly as departing breath achieved the same for him.

Before returning to the preparation of a meal they would soon share, she helped him with coat and boots, scarf and sack. Drew him into their world as the air of outer existence continued to expire and disperse, dissipate as surely as fog melts at the sun's kiss. Led him to the couch by the fire, cosy with plump cushions and heavy woollen rug. Bade him rest until she served their tea.

As she busied herself with this task in the room (for it was only one room in which they cooked, ate and lived in this old farmhouse – because of the cold and the vagaries of heating), he closed his eyes into the toasty comfort of the space and continued to breathe deeply, while outside trees froze and small creatures sheltered in longer-than burrows. But now his breaths were of the kind which took in the energy of their singular world, all else beyond having been summarily dismissed. Drawing in energy, warmth, life, all the while listening to the well-rehearsed sounds of the activities she made, the crackle of wood fire, the hiss of burning branch. Closed his eyes still, breathed deep on and on, existed in the moment, the one that lasts many – of calmness, peace, love, of one entity, life, world. A tightly-knit cocoon those beyond looked upon with wistful interest and, perhaps, shy curiosity.

Presently she brought their meal – big bowls of soup in which roughly cut vegetables jostled with small pasta pillows for the right to be amongst the first into hungry mouths. Together with a platter of bread and cheese and a bottle of regional red wine, aromatic as it approached his senses for approval. They settled in each other's embrace. No talking, no need, as long as they were locked limb to limb, connected, fused. Simply eating, drinking and breathing deep, physical needs fed, likewise their souls'. All so normal, she mused, all so regular, natural, meant to be. All so extraordinary, this wonderful beautiful ordinary. This thing called love. This thing the meaning of life.

Body sustenance complete, he leant his head against her chest. And as she stroked his short shaven hair and kissed his forehead, she said: Let me tell you the story of my week.

Mmmm, he replied. Yes. I want to know everything. Every little detail. For a story about you is surely about us. Tell it all, fully, he asked. Each nook and cranny of perception and emotion. Tell, he said, and lay there in her arms as candlelight licked their faces in painterly dreams.

This, then, is her story ...

Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in the country. She lived in the country with her love. In an old house that had breathed life for many hundreds of years before they came. To live. To simply live. To live their love. To make their world their own. Theirs. Complete. There in the old house in the country.

Sometimes he went out into the world alone. Sometimes she. Sometimes they ventured forth together. And sometimes they invited friends, like kin, to their inner sanctum. This story tells of one such occasion a few days before the dawn of a new century, the story hers alone because he was unable to come, come home, restricted there in the other world by circumstance and bad weather. The story is also his, of course, his soul if not his flesh. Because he lives within, of and through her. As she him. But she needs to tell it. Tell it as a story so he may consciously participate in an event unconsciously known and lived. Nothing exists until it is told, just as nothing can be told until it exists – so did the Sheikh and Hassan banter in *Death and the Dervish*. Does this make sense? Well it does to them. Here, then, is her story ...

On the first day there were only six of them. The girl, a pair of friends, and a family – father and two children. They exchanged gifts and ate a hearty meal before the friends left to visit other relatives this festive season while the remainder spent the afternoon quietly – reading, drawing – until the howl of wind and rattling of shutters drew their attention to the storm's approach.

She called to the father to help her secure the corrugated iron atop wood piles which threatened to break free and damage all in its path, slicing the landscape with rusted nonchalance. They worked hard

– slabs of wood were heaved into place to batten down the stacks, time and again they brought wood to the house to stoke the stove and ensure plenty was in reserve, away from the fury of the wind.

That night they lay awake listening to the storm's energy, its passion to be. Eventually the others slept, but she kept silent vigil, watch, until she heard the friends return safely in the early hours.

The next day, or rather the same, when it grew light (he listened on, meanwhile – his rhythmic breathing and heartbeat in time with hers, a product of perfect peace, yet still was he alert to her tale, quietly conscious in the way his body drew oxygen into calm lungs and pulsed blood through thankful veins), they met at the breakfast table and spoke of the happenings. Now there were seven, for the friends had returned with the man's son, a lad of fourteen whom the younger children immediately canonised due to his adept mastery of various computer games. They spoke long of their respective adventures during the storm, there at the farm or on the road, or at the friends' relatives, chattered as tea (in deference to the heritage of some) was poured into bowls (in respect of their current location), and sipped steaming between gently cupped hands. Reverential, almost, this act to witness, she mused, and he laughed softly at the image conjured.

During this ritual, she told, the electricity continually flickered and eventually, permanently, extinguished. Of course this posed no real problem to the girl in the comfort of her guests. For the wood stove provided heat, the gas oven a quick meal, lighting required only a supply of matches and candles, of which she had ample in all sizes, colours and fragrances. And he chuckled again as she told of the children's delight at these archaic mainstays of rural life as they grew ready to celebrate the birth of a new millennia, technological wizardry its staple commodity. The irony amused all visitors but she was quite happy, thank you, with this turn of events brought by the storm's elegant arrival. This was how she preferred life lived – simply – and squeezed him tight, such was the joy in her heart, bubbling forth and finding release in the magnitude of her hug.

Presently she continued her tale, told of the adults' giggled enjoining of an aeons-old ritual to cook by firelight – romanticism a complementary extra invoked by city city city lives. Yet suddenly, the electricity sputtered again to life as they sat to eat, a chess board the collective entertainment. Oh, the disappointment! A melancholic sigh spontaneously escaped a half dozen pairs of lips as their fantasy world singly vanished in the harsh reality of bare-wattled overhead bulbs.

The dynamic shifted again next evening, she told, when another French-Australian couple (so many mixed partnerships she laughed and again squeezed tight his chest in the knowledge that theirs was the best, most purest of examples drawn) arrived with a big wiry-haired dog named Daubone. They all plunged into the room muddily (accompanied by much clattering of toenails and fragrant joint-fuelled laughter) in the midst of a snowstorm which had followed hot-on-the-heels of the other, more irregular, weather to reassert itself as the prevailing atmospheric condition of the season in question, arms laden with Aussie Christmas treats – the Grandma's-recipe Christmas pudding (flamed in locally-acquired Grand Marnier as the requisite brandy could not be sourced), washed down with Yellowglen, no less, direct from the Barossa.

Heaven-sent they were, she said, explaining (as a tear fell from her eye to graze his cheek) how she had especially wished him present at that moment – to participate in a seasonal tradition of 10,000 miles and a hemispheric shift far, a homeland she sometimes missed beyond rational belief.

Yet a long, spirited and generosity-filled evening had followed this transitory twist of melancholy, floodlit by hand-painted and subtly flower-patterned blue, orange and red light bulbs which, by magic, had displaced the regular occupants of the overhead sockets (the children had had to close their eyes, and their wonder was a joy to behold). These new friends were full of surprises, she laughingly described – unsurprisingly, however, given their worldview included a Russian winter courtesy of the Moscow Circus School.

The next day, she concluded, all returned to their respective homes. Despite the half metre of snow overnight that had extracted squeals of delight from the children as they made snow angels and slid

down hillsides on improvised sledges made from bags of straw ('banana slugs' so-dubbed by their vivid imaginations, she laughed; but he shook his head in confusion until she explained the likeness – yellow, flat and blubby). The snow plough came presently to clear the road, and also, kindly, up to the farmhouse. Thus could the exodus begin with much waving and kissing and sincere wishes for safe journeys.

Silence returned, she murmured, as suddenly as it had fled. Silence returned, like a close family friend, to once more cloak the house in peace.

And I, he asked?

She smiled. The cloak lists to admit entrance to one of its own. This cocoon was built for two, she reminded him.

They held each other then, as she drew her story to a close, as the candles burned low in synchrony. That is all, she said. There isn't any more.

Except this, he replied. The beauty, the wonder of what we have here, in and of ourselves, alone. Nothing more, he said. Nothing more is needed.

So they stayed, tight-wrapped on the old couch, like nested fishes while the candles burned away to nothing. Nothing needed. For here was all. And if you listened close to their breathing, in time, in company, in rhythm, it was the same asleep as awake, such was the state of perfect peace they had created, built, divined, simply by existing. Simply by existing. Together. As one.

Bonne nuit, dear reader, bonne nuit.