

Mr and Mrs Hopper, Room Eighteen

He is Tom; she is Edie. He always signs them in as Mr and Mrs Hopper. There is a painting he likes by an American artist called Hopper, and the subject looks like her. They've agreed that room eighteen is their lucky number. It was their first number, and it is often the last room in the row. They are not married; they are not the family with young children, nor the travelling workers that this kind of hotel serves with sheets tucked tight and full breakfasts.

There are many of these hotels. It is Australia, and the roads are long. These hotels dot them: neat, clean and filled with lemony light, on dry roadsides lined with crackling ghost gums. They have seen them time and again, and at nearly all of these hotels is the same story: a young man and his wife live with a small child and a smaller dog. She does the tightly tucked beds, cooks toast that fills the air with a warm yeasty smell, turns out perfectly concentric fried eggs from their rings and arranges the little homely touches, knick-knacks placed on doilies in the dozen-and-a-half rooms: here a china dog, there a shepherdess figurine.

The young man, a father and husband, does the jobs he must, unblocking drainpipes with his plunger, painting sills on an annual cycle, trimming and mowing and making quick chat with those men who meet his eyes.

The child with large eyes watches from a swing-set, trails behind his dad with a bucket of tools or follows his mum with a duster in hand.

One day Edie says to Tom, "Imagine that poor child, watching all those other kids come and go, going somewhere filled with fun and excitement, the daily friendships so quickly lost." Her voice has the hazy quality of a dream, and inside Tom's heart, a heart that

has often felt mechanical like clockwork, clunky with anxieties, another gear shifts, and he falls yet again deeper in love with her. She has this way of noticing everyday things as if they are single music notes rather than the hum of normalcy. It has become revelatory to him, her way of sensing and feeling; it opens him up so that his lungs expand in his chest and the world smells sharper, as if it has been fresh-washed and hung out to dry in the light.

It is hot; the sun is high and directly over their room's tin roof. Tom is still damp from his shower as Edie walks out from the bathroom naked, her wheaten hair pulled behind her ears. Her face is clear of make-up and chiselled in profile. The window is open and the voile curtains are drawn, the lightest of barriers. In this hotel there are back windows too, facing out across the distant chalk-blue mountains and striations of olive and grey land. For a moment Tom sees her standing in a square of milky white light, an imprint on his retina that lingers. On her skin are the fine traces of blue veins. Her belly is flushed with a roseate glow from the heat of the shower, and her shoulders are pale, their lines pure and sharp. She is tall, statuesque, strong. She turns to him and says, "Love, could you make me a gin and tonic? I think there is still some ice in the tray."

Sometimes Tom finds himself smiling ruefully; they are a cliché so time-worn, a boss and his secretary, yet he feels new with her. He is head of advertising-sales for a small chain of local newspapers churning out family-friendly breakfast reading. In the office they all agree their work is probably blotting paper for coffee rings, or tomorrow's fish and chip dinner. Edie is head of the typing pool and beginning to write copy, social pages mostly, but he thinks she's good at it, and better than she knows.

They both have marriages that trot along as neat and sedate as a row of nuns to matins. It's an image he cannot shake off, ever the lapsed Catholic. Edie has a girl, and Tom has twin boys. He loves her and, he's sure, she loves him. They will not leave their families, it is understood, even if at times he wishes otherwise. He dreams of other tracks, does she?

Sometimes Edie dreams of leaving her marriage for Tom. The dream tastes like mangoes. She is on a train heading up to Sydney where they will meet to begin a life together. There is a friend of Tom's in Coffs Harbour who has arranged the cheap lease on a holiday cabin. They will eat fish, drink long cold beers, sleep, read and love together. There is no money; who needs it? She is ashamed to know that also, there are no children in this dream. Just rumpled sheets that smell like their sex and the sea-salt air they dry them in. A life of vagrancy. She will make their little home sweet with pale curtains and bake bread because it smells like Tom's skin. It will be a life filled with his voice, which she loves. She loves how he talks with her. He hears her and nods, head cocked as though his ear wants to catch some precious thing. With him her brightness shines, her wit and her smartness. His voice has a dry, nubby texture that blankets her soul. His forearm, brown from driving, will circle her waist at night and pull her against the heat of his chest. She will press back, more, and make gentle adjustments in her hips and thighs that let him enter her, fill her heavily, then rock, rock, rock them both towards their sighing pleasure.

Oh yes, Edie dreams of it all. Yet even as she curls in bliss and her feet twitch, the dream veers away onto a dark track, and she hears her daughter crying at bedtime. "I want my Mum." She sees her girl's open face twist with self-doubt. *I am un-loveable. She didn't love me. Not enough to stay.* She sees her girl growing up stained by the mother who left on a train with a bag of mangoes and a small suitcase.

On the train of dreams, the night-porter hears Edie's soft whimper and closes the door.

Tom makes their drinks, and they settle into chairs beside the window. His white towel is cool round his waist and legs. Edie is still naked. He catches the clean smell of lavender soap that mists her skin. It's a smell he associates with erotic promise. They have become safe inside these rooms, safe in each other's company. Three years, bright red hurts, slow green shoots of words he's heard until now he feels there is an odd kind of grace with which they talk, a great care not to harm each other.

Tom's wife is not cruel. She is good at the job of being a wife and doesn't lean on the sandwiches to cut their neat triangles. This morning he tumbled with his boys, madly in love with their bony knees and scabs, their pungent curls and skins so pale they bounced light. James had a ratbag tantrum full of squeals because Tom had insisted on Wheaties for breakfast and not lollies left over from a visit from his Mum, who spoils them. And as usual, in the lovely tussle of his morning, Edie had receded. But at night she keeps him awake, a call, a voice beyond his window, whispering words of love and sex. He imagines her cat-like, alternatively cautious or wild, prowling the perimeters of his marriage, his safety and sureties. A cat that won't come in.

Once she had told Tom, 'My husband doesn't see me, not really. It's more like I'm...a kind of cog in the machinery his life.'

Tom had to ask, "Do you and he make love?"

"No. He kisses me and smiles and rubs my shoulder. He's not unkind...and he's affectionate in his way." Edie pauses, trying to make something clear, more to herself he thinks. "It embarrasses him that I work. In his family women don't work, it means their men can't provide properly." She laughs a little wryly. "So I'm the weird Women's Libber to them. But I want my Sarah to grow up like that, feeling she can do anything she sets her mind to...not just the housekeeping."

It's like a punch in the gut when she tells him that. How can this man not love her, her fight and her care? To be loved by her sharpens every colour he sees, every texture and taste. When she takes him into her body, or her conversation, or into her sweeping and curious gaze, it is a joy that resonates even as she walks away and to that other life she lives. Yet something in Tom is kicking at it all; the feeling of treading water sometimes rises up to choke him. They are both caught. He spent years writing weather reports and knows that two forces can't work in equal tension against each other forever. What will give? What will happen next, and which of his or her loves will be the nudging force that tips them into change?

Last week he had stood in a kind of fugue-state, staring at his stubble-dark face in the mirror. Morning TV and dishes rattled away, the boys chirruped in their strange twin-talk and Margery sang as she made coffee. He had put on foam to shave. Then, razor at his throat, set to scrape, he'd gagged, and his head had swam and he'd had to hold the basin for a minute. *Am I here? I can see I am here. I must be here. But where in God's name am I going?*

It is with him now, a feeling that the gin won't trickle down his throat. His chest tightens sharply, a ruthless pulling that draws his shoulders in hard. *I can't breathe, I can't breathe! I'm going to pass out.* He gags and puts his hand to his mouth where the drink has dribbled. He feels mortified or panicked; the fist on his heart punches down hard and hot tears squeeze from his eyes. Words tumble out as staccato as ice-cubes into a glass. "Please. With me. Come live with me. Oh, God, Edie please come away with me."

Tom gropes towards her lap and feels her stiffen with the shock of it. He's shocked himself. So often he's wondered when he'd say 'enough' and end it. Or she would. Yet now his words hang in the hot air, unmoved by the currents pushed by a slow-turning fan. Her hand drifts onto his neck, and he catches a whiff of lavender. Her hand is cool. Her silence

beats out before she soothes him, as a mother does. “Shh.” Edie kneels against him, patting his hair. “Shh, shh.”

Tom hears the shower dripping. He hears nothing. He hears the heat whisper round the room and the low-beating fan. He hears nothing.

“We need to pack up, are you ready?” She rises.

“The room is paid until two.”

“It’s one now; we have to get back by four.”

“Why won’t you say something?” His fingers curl hard into his palm. “Just say it.” He is braced; this will be it, the ending that always hangs over their heads. Will she do it? They’ve come close before, he’s always known just how close.

“I am saying something. You know I get nervous as we leave.”

“No one is driving by Edie, look, it’s deserted.” He waves to the front window, veiled in sheer lace. Outside, the sun blazes silver spangles on the line of gum trees. “You won’t, will you? Won’t even talk to me about it. You know it could work. Damn it Edie! Kids survive wars.”

“No.” Her voice is back-bone strong, mother-bone strong.

And a part of him is home, relieved to be done with the razor-blade of risk, reminiscing about her even as he helps Margery with the nightly ritual of baths and teeth-brushing and bedtime stories.

A car crunches gravel outside as it slows to turn and park. Tinny music spill from its radio: ‘Glad All Over’ and children’s voices burble along, tired with the excitement of long car travel; he glances out to see brown bodies and old luggage jostle and trip towards the

room next door. He pulls the heavy blue drapes across. Edie rises. With the drapes pulled closed it is dim in room eighteen. She moves to him and rests her head on his shoulder. He feels the coolness of her cheek, the heat of her breasts and belly. "I love you."

"I know. She breathes against his neck. I love you too."

They dress, efficiently and quietly in the half light, and Tom is careful to turn off the fan and collect small items dropped hours before. Edie holds a handbag and puts on tortoiseshell sunglasses as she stands waiting at the door. Tom shoulders his travel-bag and steps from the shaded doorway towards his car. He leaves the door ajar behind them, it saves checking out.

He looks back, just once. Room eighteen adjusts itself around their departure. Dust motes drift onto the hastily remade bed; wet towels slump on the floor. The room-key glints in the bowl as the fan drags a final time then stills, like an exhaled breath. When he is gone the room will curl in on silence, closing on their love like a mouth kissing firm around a secret.

Edie is close.

Tom looks into the bright sun and reaches for her fingers.