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— SELECTIONS —

A minor loss of fidelity

Christine Kearney

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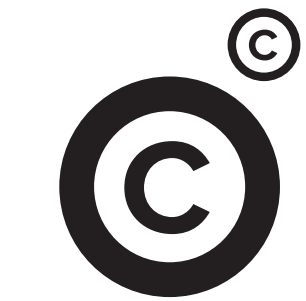

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FICTION

A minor loss of fidelity

Christine Kearney

THE HOUSE ON THE CORNER

THEY LIVED IN a small, white house on the corner, a block back from the beach. On one side of their house was the grave of their neighbour's boy, Senhor Miguel's son. The boy had died of dengue several years ago and Senhor Miguel and his wife had planted a beautiful garden on the block in which he was buried. It was full of palms and bougainvillea, lime and mandarin trees and three tall leafy Balinese trees in which the tiny *manu fuik*, wild birds, loved to hide. Though she had never met the boy she knew that his mother believed *ema*, someone with a grudge to bear, a witch perhaps, had killed her son. *Ema mak halo*. Someone did him in. The proof of this, the mother said, was in the fact that during the hours before he died the boy's skin turned completely black.

THE BORDER

THEY HAD BEEN away for three years, and a month after they arrived back in Timor they drove the four hours up to Maliana to visit Ato's family.

On their first afternoon in Maliana, they went up to the cemetery overlooking the town, with candles and matches and flowers from the garden

in a *raga* basket. They scattered the flowers on Apa's and Sis's graves; and on the recent grave of a child, which was inscribed only with the word *Anzu*. Angel. Ama said a prayer and they lit the candles and fixed them into the gravestones and then, from the cemetery, they swept back down the hill into Maliana town and when they got back to Ama's house, Tanya curled up in one of the low green plastic chairs in the living room.

– I feel sick in my tummy, she said.

– What's wrong with Tanya? asked Milly.

Tanya's forehead was hot and dry and she was put to bed.

– She's a bit sick, that's all, said Kate.

Ama sat by her side and put cold compresses on her brow, her neck, under her arms. The girls weren't used to the river, complained Ama. Perhaps a *nain*, a spirit from the river, had followed Tanya back after their swim that afternoon and was making her sick. But Aunty Joana said, no, Tanya was big enough and tall enough not to be bothered by a *nain*. She was just tired.

– Too much running around, declared Aunty.

The godson, a nurse, was called. He was at the hospital and he told Ama to send someone down for paracetamol and to borrow a thermometer and that he would look in on Tanya later.

Henrique was dispatched. He started up his bike and rode off, his headlights visible all the way to the crossroads. The power was off, the town in darkness. The stars were hard and bright in the sky above and the blunt shadow of Mount Loelaco loomed over them to the east. To the north, across the border in Indonesia, Kate could make out the lights of small houses, much like Ama's she guessed, except that they had power. And how friendly those little lights looked, over there, on the side of the border that was electrified.

Candles were fixed onto the floor of the living room and in the bedroom where Tanya slept. Ama sat and watched her. Every so often, she would call for someone to change the water in the compress basin. The water was hurled into the dark yard and fresh water was ladled into the basin from the bucket in the bathroom. The compresses were taken off, soaked in clean water, wrung out and replaced.

Another aunty from up near the cemetery arrived with her four children. The godson's brother came to say hello. Then a great aunty and uncle from

two doors down walked across. *Boa noite* each called, as they stepped up out of the gloom and on to the veranda.

NOITE, NOITE. TUUR tiha lai. Hello, grab a seat, came the reply and people would be given plastic seats to sit on, depending on their age and seniority. On one *biti* mat, a card game was taking place. Someone else strummed a guitar. The bottle of chardonnay they had bought at Leader Store in Dili was opened and shared out.

– What's taking Henrique so long? wondered Ama.

Then Nanda took a call on her phone.

– Hit? What? she said. He's been hit. Henrique's been hit!

Everyone piled into the living room and crowded around Nanda. *Hit? Hit where? Who hit him? Where is he? Who did it?*

Akau and Nanda were dispatched to the hospital to find out what had happened. They took the remaining bike, their headlights picking out the street leading down to the crossroads and then the main drag heading into the centre of town.

Two hours later, Henrique limped into the house. He was helped into one of the low plastic chairs and his bandaged foot was laid on another chair.

– What happened? asked Ama. *Monu karik?* Did you take a tumble?

– *La monu ida*. I didn't fall.

He said he was driving past the Kodim, the old Indonesian military barracks, when the other bike rode out, without lights, and crashed into Henrique's right side, crushing his foot against his bike.

– I yelled at him: *Soke ema hanesan ne'e, halo nusa'a maun!* What the hell do you think you're doing brother, running into someone like that? And you know what he said to me? He goes, 'Just you wait, I'll come back and finish you off.'

– *Animal*.

– *Bandido*.

– Bastard.

– And driving with his lights off.

Was it the 77 gang? wondered one of the cousins. Of course! 77 had cooked this up, sending a former student of Henrique's to attack him because

Henrique had once belonged to the rival PSHT. And what about Henrique's girlfriend? The scenario was sketched out in more detail. A disgruntled ex–student, jealous of Henrique and in love with his girlfriend, was used to strike a blow for 77. And when they bandaged him up at the hospital, had they put something in the bandage, some black magic, to make the wound go septic?

It was possible, said the godson. The 77 were everywhere. Who could say what might happen if one of the medical staff were SH or sympathetic.

– Take the bandage off, said Henrique. It's hot, take it off.

With the aid of a mobile phone torch, the bandage was unwrapped and everyone peered down at his foot, which was swollen and puffy and awful looking.

People pressed him about who had run into him.

– You must have known him, said one.

– Had he threatened you? asked Nanda. Was he making moves on your girlfriend?

– I'm telling you I didn't know him. I'd never seen him before. *Ita moras sa*. Stop it will ya, I'm sick.

He slumped further into the plastic chair, looking morose. People drifted away from his chair. The godson went in and took Tanya's temperature.

– *Hira?* asked Ama, anxiously.

– 38. *Kole,* said the godson kindly. The kid's tired.

– You don't think it's dengue do you? asked Kate. Dengue or malaria? She's so hot.

– Nah, let's give her some paracetamol and then let her go back to sleep, he said.

The paracetamol was measured out.

– Darling, can you sit up and have some medicine? asked Kate.

She woke to see the godson standing over her with a spoonful of medicine and half a dozen others peering down at her.

– No, she howled. Noooooo!

She wouldn't take the medicine. Four held her down but she wouldn't take it. She screamed and kicked like a horse.

– OK, no medicine darling. Just have some water for Mummy.

She sipped some water and the cold compresses were reapplied.

Back in the living room, the godson said there'd been another crash that night. Down at the hospital they'd had word that a police ute had rolled off a cliff outside Balibo.

– *Nain sia mate*. Nine dead.

– Not nine, seven, said Henrique, who'd heard the same story while he was waiting in the hospital.

– It was nine, *maromak ne'e*. I swear it, said the godson.

The body count fell, wavered, shot back up again. The story grew. There was a party, a wedding party. And then there was a fight. It was the groom's sister. A case of *selingkuh* – flirting. She was dancing with one of the young policemen and her boyfriend went wild. He yanked her off the dance floor, took her outside and started to lay into her. The policeman rallied his mates, the boyfriend had the groom's family on his side and soon it was on for young and old. *Baku malu*. A biffo.

– *Baku to'o tasak,* said the godson with glee. He got the crap beaten out of him.

They let him stumble to his bike, thinking that he would slink off in shame. But as the boyfriend was riding away, he pelted the police ute with rocks, dinting the body and cracking the front windscreen. The coppers gave chase. And then, the accident – the misjudging of a curve and the car careering off the road and tumbling into a ravine. All dead. *Mate hotu*.

– What about the boyfriend? asked Kate. Did he go over the cliff too?

The godson shrugged. No one knew.

By 4 am, Tanya's fever had dropped and the cold compresses were thrown back into the basin.

At six, Ama woke and ordered that a chicken be slaughtered, plucked and cleaned. It was thrown into the pot with rice, salt and olive oil, and a *sasoru* broth was cooked over a woodstove out the back of the house.

Tanya woke and was spoon-fed two bowls of porridge and said, sunnily: I feel better, Mum.

The godson came by again with the paracetamol and the untouched thermometer in his black medicine bag. He sat down in one of the green chairs beside Henrique and had a bowl of chicken porridge too.

Someone asked about the casualties from the accident.

– Pah! What casualties? *Nain ida kanek*. One wounded when he rolled his car, drunk, coming back from the wedding, he said.

Milly tugged at Kate's hand, and asked, wide-eyed: What happened to Uncle Henrique?

THE CAPITAL

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, they took the back road up to Leader Store to get their groceries. They were waiting for the lights to change so they could get into the car park, when behind them they heard the crack of glass and felt something hit the car. They both ducked.

– Shit, said Kate.

– *Figuraun*, said Ato.

He put his head up and looked back.

– *Inan na hikun!*

– What?

– *Oh animal*. Someone's hit us.

She looked back too and saw that the back windscreen was completely shattered, a dense cobweb of white glass. In the top corner, behind the driver's seat, was a large hole.

The traffic behind them started to beep and they eased the car on to the side of the road outside Leader. They got out of the car and walked around to inspect the damage. Two of the parking attendants came running over and a small crowd gathered. The crowd stared at the car, then at her, then at Ato, then back at the car.

– But who? she asked. I didn't see anyone.

– Kids. Could have come from over there.

He gestured to a decrepit row of shop houses across the road.

– Why would someone want to stone our car?

– Come on let's go.

They got back in the car and drove home without water, without groceries. On the way back, her foot nudged something hard and she reached down and retrieved the rock. It was the size of a small patty cake.

– What'd they *tuda* us for?

Ato shook his head.

-Just kids, playing with a *fisga*, a slingshot, he said.

As they drove back in to the *bairo*, they saw a group of people gathered outside Senhor Miguel's house. All were wearing black – black pants, black shirts and T-shirts, black skirts and dresses and blouses.

– *Mate*, said Ato. Someone's died.

POLICIA MATE

IT WAS A bright, still morning and as they reversed out of the driveway with a new back windscreen, Tanya said happily: And it's nice and sunny.

As though we're ever short on sun here, thought Kate, as though we ever, ever want for sun in this part of the world.

She dropped the kids at school.

– Mummy, said Milly, can you buy me a precious thing?

– Yes, darling, of course.

– Yipee.

From school, she went back down Pantai Kelapa as a country 'n' western number came on the radio, beaming in from the station in Lisbon, and a gravelly Johnny Cash-like voice sang:

Like how much

can a tree bend in the wind?

The song's bassline accompanied her past the little fish market, past the grey and gold statue of a *kris* dagger in the front yard of the Malaysian Embassy, past the lemon-coloured Mexican consulate, past the expansive lawn of the American embassy, past the Portuguese, Brazilian, Indonesian, Australian and Japanese residencies. Down past the old lighthouse she drove, as a Maliana bus with *Vai com Deus* writ large across its front windscreen roared in the opposition direction. Godspeed. She went right at Jardim and up to the Comoro intersection where the lights were out, the dots that made up the green pulsing off and on like a sea anemone and the traffic cop whistled them through and the song finished and the voice of the graveyard-shift announcer, whispering in a sultry tone because it was the middle of the night in Lisbon,

came back on, and a yellow taxi snuck in front of her. Splashed across the front of the taxi were the words *Hau comprende*. I understand.

STEPPING INSIDE THE Ministry from the bright car park, Kate was glad, as always, of its cool, dim, slightly dank interior.

She walked up to her room on the first floor, *Bom dia'd* her colleagues and plugged in the laptop.

The Ministry was a white two-storey, Indonesian-era building halfway between the waterfront and the UN compound. It was always cooler than the street outside and she'd grown fond of its grimy white walls, dusty and rain-speckled windows, the masses of files, discarded HP computer boxes, the odd tyre or radiator grill or abandoned water cooler heaped in unused corridors and corners on the ground floor. She'd come to appreciate the languor of the place, which sounded a cautionary note to foreigners: *Doing things at our own pace. Proceed without haste*.

Colleagues giving directions to the Ministry often described it by reference to the memorial across the road, erected in honour of the nine policemen who had been gunned down there in the middle of the 2006 troubles.

– *Justisa sa. Fatin polisia mate? Ehh-sa*. Justice. The place where the cops were killed? That's it.

If her colleagues ever gave a passing thought to the memorial, they showed no sign of it. It was now only a marker that guided people into the Ministry; and in the Ministry, with a friend or a relative who was a public servant, with an entrée into the Minister's office, with a bit of patience and a bit of luck and sometimes, with a bit of money, it was possible to obtain a government service. People came to get business registration certificates, birth certificates, to apply for passports or to sit on the row of bright blue chairs outside the *Gabinete Sua Excelensia a Ministra* and wait for an audience with the Minister herself. Portly Timorese and Chinese businessmen waited alone or in pairs, legs crossed, smoking, one arm stretched out across the back of the couch. Families with intractable land disputes or long-running court cases came too, often in large groups of six or eight people and quite unlike the businessmen, they seemed to wait with equal parts hope, a sort of nervous expectation and resignation too. While Kate sometimes saw the

same businessmen twice in one week, she never saw the family groups more than once.

AFTER LOGGING ON, the first task of the day, always done in a fever of misplaced expectation, was the sifting through of the twenty or thirty emails that had arrived overnight.

First, to a warning about crocodiles: *If members of the host community remain on shore waving vigorously, this is sure indication that a crocodile may have been sighted*.

Then to a reminder, that as a female member of staff she was eligible to have a new device, *A Stand Alone Panic Button,* installed in her home. Free of charge. Who or what would respond to a call from *A Stand Alone Panic Button*, should she have one installed and need to push it one night, was unclear.

Another warning: *Due to the character of their activities, the following bars are OFF LIMITS to all UN personnel: Dream Bar, Great Wall of China Bar, Non Drunken Bar, U May Flower Bar.*

Then to the situation report or 'sitrep'. The sitrep was compiled by UN military liaison officers, who trekked from one end of the country to the other, interviewing village chiefs and local leaders.

Horse was their only transport but not at the moment as all the horses died during the last rainy season. There is a food shortage. Some families are laboring in other people's fields and being paid in rice. Some are eating only once a day.

The sitrep was a daily reminder of the way people lived, just 30 kilometres from the capital.

Then to a notice about the free insect repellent available from the UN pharmacy. *Staff are strongly advised to avail themselves of free repellent, given a sharp increase in the incidence of vector-borne illnesses, such as dengue*.

Did they have repellent at home? She would try to remember to pick some up next time she was at the UN compound.

Finally, every morning, she would flick across to the *Sydney Morning Herald* for the ritual scan of the news back home. *Brother accused of brolly attack* she read. *Mobile phone users stung by free calls. Terrigal woman survives cliff fall*.

She clicked on the last story. She read about the woman's fall, her cries for

help, the neighbour who was out in his back garden and heard her, the heli, the winching to safety, the short flight to the local hospital.

Order and reason. The story was order and reason itself.

But there are no helis in the sitreps, she thought. No helis and no heli rescues for people who fall down cliffs and break their legs. In fact, she thought, in most places across this blue earth there are no helis. She closed the *SMH* screen.

A reminder popped up: *Meeting with STA. UN Agencies Conference Room.*

THE STA, THE project's senior technical adviser, was just back from a conference in New York.

– What was the conference about again? Kate asked a colleague as they waited for the STA to arrive.

– I think it was basically ROL-in-the-region.

– Right, she said cautiously.

– Like a regional perspective on ROL-strengthening, he offered.

– ROL as in… ?

He turned to her, incredulous. Rule of law?

The advisor click-clacked in.

– *Bom dia a todas.* Huh, but am I jet-lagged. That trip was hell. I promise you, I am not gonna go to New York again, even if they beg me. Judge Honoria got these terrible migraines the whole time we were there. I was doing a lot of handholding. She touched her hair, smiled around the table.

– It was wearing. But worth it, because I cannot tell you about the address she gave to the conference. Her words were…were diamonds, truly. They just loved her.

She told the meeting that there was a lot of interest in their program from the regional office.

– The word on absolutely everyone's lips is the rule of law, she said. The rule of law is queen. And this, she promised, was good news for their project. At the urging of colleagues in New York, they would submit a proposal to the Regional Bureau for Peace Building and the Prevention of Conflict.

– We'll be able to get funding like this, she said and snapped her fingers, snap, snap, snap, an imaginary mill here, a couple of hundred thousand there.

– We can do a lot here, she continued, a lot. I mean they were interested in youth, in martial arts gangs, in doing something on domestic violence.

– Domestic violence. That's great, nodded a colleague. What sort of a project were you thinking of?

– Victim empowerment, something like that, she said with a wave of the hand.

– With an access-to-justice model?

– No, no, no. We need something new here. Something new. What I had in mind – what I discussed with colleagues from New York – was more of a social-business model of economic empowerment.

Nods around the table.

– Nice, said one colleague.

– In which the victims are given loans, soft loans –

– Like micro-credit?

– Please, can we not…can we not use the term 'micro-credit' here? What we are gonna do is so much more than micro-credit. I mean micro-credit – ho-hum. We are going to lift victims out of a cycle of economic dependency, through training, education and facilitation towards entrepreneurship. Loans may be a part of that but let's not give the impression that we are asking for funding to merely replicate any one of a dozen micro-credit programs already operating in this country. This is gonna be something that the regional office has never seen before.

Each of them was given a section of the report to draft. One colleague volunteered for *A Social-Business Model of Economic Empowerment for Victims of Gender-Based Violence*. Another had *Institutional Strengthening and Autonomy*; a third was given *Improving Accountability Through Professionalisation of Justice Sector Actors*.

Kate was given *Juvenile Justice and Conflict Prevention: A Positive Role-Modelling Intervention Through Sport and Cultural Exchange*.

– Keep it snappy, the STA reminded them. And I want highlights. And numbers, people. Do not forget – she chopped the air with a hand for emphasis – that we need to list the number of beneficiaries for each and every activity. And if you can disaggregate by gender, by rural youth or by

pre-existing economic disadvantage that would be even better. They're gonna love it. I tell you, they're gonna adore it.

She click-clacked out, calling for the driver.

– *Sr Armando? Vamos, vamos, vamos para Hotel Timor!*

IN THE AFTERNOON Kate drove out of the Ministry car park, past the groups of staff standing around chatting, laughing, smoking, sitting on their motorbikes or waiting for lifts.

She took an illegal turn down towards the water from the *policia mate* intersection and as she eased her way into the maw of traffic, she realised that the intersection was just like a roundabout but without the round. The traffic lights had long ago stopped working and the intersection had to be negotiated carefully in peak hour, when those from Audian barrelled straight down towards the Cathedral, those from Camp Phoenix and the Tribunal ba Rekursu eased their way down to the waterfront or took a right for the Cathedral and anyone turning up from the waterfront, right from Audian or coming straight down from Camp Phoneix had to contend with the Ministry rat-runners. Anyone and everyone swung on to the wrong side of the road whenever they wanted. Bikes cut off cars; cars cut off trucks; police and military Prados turned their sirens on and blazed forward; and trailers and ancient lorries swung into streets that were never designed for heavy vehicles, forcing others to reverse and make way for their great and unsteady loads.

Past Páteo and the old SAPT compound she went, past the boys selling *pulsa* and the day's papers, into the Hotel Timor street and to another intersection without lights, where she waited, with a four-wheel-drive beside her and bikes revving behind her, until there was a slight break in the oncoming traffic and as one, they surged across towards Jardim.

Once she was heading back up Pantai Kelapa, she was on the home stretch. Up ahead on the horizon, she could just make out Alor island and a great mass of towering clouds, billowing up into the hazy sky behind it. Everything about Timor was vertical – those clouds, the mountains, the great spiny centre of the island viewed from a plane window. Australia, by comparison, was horizontal. Even in the middle of the city back home, you knew it, you felt the space, the sense of it all around you.

But not here. Not here.

She drove past the Japanese, the Australian, the Indonesian, the Brazilian and the Portuguese residencies and then, standing on the seawall across from the American embassy, she saw a boy holding up a tuna. She stopped the car and signalled to him. He waited for a break in the traffic and hurried across the street to her.

– How much? she asked.

He licked his lips nervously, looked around.

– Twenty-five, he blurted out.

– Twenty, *ba*.

A moment's hesitation, then a quick nod. With a razor blade, he cut the pale yellowy-green strip of palm leaf threaded through the gills and passed the fish to her through the open window. She gave him twenty dollars. He shoved it into his hip pocket, adjusted his cap and headed back across the street.

BOOKCLUB AT THE LONGTIME MARKET

– FISH FOR TEA, she said, laying the tuna on the kitchen bench. Look at the beautiful fish Mummy bought.

– Hmm. Can we give some to Olivia? asked Tanya.

– Olivia has worms, darling. No more feeding Olivia. Olivia'll have to fend for herself again I'm afraid.

– But I have a good idea, Mum. We could just like, put the food in the garden over there and not pat her when we fed her. And then we wouldn't get worms.

– Worms, said Milly, incredulous. What's worms?

– Oh my gosh, don't you even know what worms are? Cats have them. In their bums.

Giggles.

– In their bums, they sang in unison.

With Olivia mewling at the kitchen window, they gutted the fish, put the head in the freezer for soup and cut the body into steaks. They fried up three steaks and ate them with yellow rice and tomato *budu* and the last of an Alentejano red, as they watched the evening news.

– *Eh pa*, look at that will you? said Ato.

The hospital was admitting twenty-five new cases of dengue a day and had opened temporary wards in meeting rooms to cope with the influx.

– Can you tell us a story? asked Tanya.

– How come so much dengue this year? asked Kate.

– I don't know, said Ato slowly.

– Can-you-tell-us-a-story? asked Tanya.

– Not now, I'm watching the news.

– After the news, can you?

– I've got book club.

– Aww, not again.

– A quick one, said Kate. If – if you get ready right now. Off you go, quick sticks.

They lay on the bottom bunk, with their heads on the same pillow.

– You know Rapunzel? asked Kate.

– Rapunzel the DVD? asked Tanya.

– Well once there was a girl in Timor who had beautiful long hair, just like Rapunzel.

– And Mother Gothel?

– Her name was Bui Hikas.

ONCE UPON A time in a small kingdom in the east of the country, there was a girl with long, thick, heavy black hair. This girl's hair was so heavy that she couldn't comb it all herself. And so her father, who was the king, the *liurai*, told Bui Hikas to come up to their compound every day and comb the girl's hair.

Bui Hikas' hair was coarse and straw-like and she lived in a tiny hut down by the river. She envied the girl's long tresses and her gold jewellery and her sturdy house and the corn stacked in her father's granary and the chickens pecking around his compound and one night, as she lay on the packed earth of her little hut and rubbed her empty stomach and thought about the *liurai*'s wealth and his beautiful daughter with her long, black hair, she realised that there was one thing that the *luirai* lacked. A son.

– Ha ha, said Bui Hikas, sitting up in the dark, that's my way in. If I can give him a child, he'll take me as his wife and the kid will have to kiss *my* hand and comb *my* hair.

But Bui Hikas knew that she was too old to have a child.

Never mind all that, she thought. I've still got a trick or two up my sleeve.

And the next morning, before dawn, she crept out of her hut, crossed the river and headed west.

She disappeared for two months, and the *luirai* got another village woman in to comb his daughter's hair.

When Bui Hikas came back, she presented herself to the *luirai*. Her hair was soft, her skin was bright and smooth, her eyes were glowing, and she had a small belly. She told the *liurai* that the ancestors had given her a child; and that the *liurai* must adopt this child, take him in as his own.

At this suggestion, the *luirai's* adjutant stood up as though he was about to slap Bui Hikas.

– How dare you talk like this? said the adjutant.

– How could I take another man's child and pretend it was mine? asked the *luirai* mildly.

Bui Hikas bowed even lower and as she did so, she slipped a small parcel of dried herbs under one of the sleeping mats in the *liurai's* room.

– I'm just a simple woman, my lord. It's not for me to say what's possible or not. I don't understand these complicated things, kingly things and what the ancestors intend for you or for me or for your kingdom. All I know is what they told me. They told me that I should come to you and offer you the child in my belly, to take as your own. And that this child would bring you good luck and bring your kingdom good luck.

The *liurai* snorted.

– Enough. Get outta here, he said.

And the king's man chased her out, said Kate.

– Phew. And did she never come back? asked Tanya.

– You'll have to wait and see.

– And why did she hide something under the *biti*? asked Milly.

– Don't know.

– Just tell us, said Tanya.

– Wait and see.

– But just tell us, was it magic or not what she put under the mat?

– Goodnight my darlings.

– Mummyyyyy!

AT BOOK CLUB, the talk was of degustation and wine pairing. They drank cheap Aussie merlot from coloured, plastic cups and imagined meals elsewhere.

– But I just have to pair, said one, and that pushes the price right up.

Kate followed the conversation vaguely. The wine pairer had been to Tetsuya's. A new place had opened on the Brisbane River. The wine pairer had not been there but had heard it was excellent. There were two copies of *Jasper Jones* on the table, a Franzen and a few other books she'd never heard of. She picked up a *New Yorker* and flicked through it. Her mind wandered back to the news that night. Jesus, she thought, an epidemic. God forbid the kids get dengue. And she'd forgotten to get the repellent from the UN that morning.

– Really, if you go to Tetsuya's, do the whole degustation, she advised. Do. It's four hundred –

– Four hundred!

– I know, she said and held up a hand to ward off any further protest, but you can't go to Tetsuya's and not do the whole degustation, I mean, can you?

At the end of the night, Kate waited to cross the street while an Aussie troopie rumbled past, headed for Camp Phoenix. A pair of khaki-covered legs were visible in the orange light from the street lamps, the soldier's torso hidden inside the dark cab. She'd parked beside the Mercado Lama fence and for a moment she wished that she'd called out to the soldiers and asked for an escort to her car. How ridiculous. A *malae* lady stopping a truck full of soldiers for fear of a dark car park.

A covered truck, like the troopie but bigger, was parked alongside her car and as she approached the car door, with her box of cakes tucked under one arm – mango macaroons and a gingerbread man each for the girls – two young boys stepped out of the gloom

– Meat, missus, you want some meat? said one of the boys, reaching into his pants.

Had she heard him correctly? She wanted to pretend he was just hungry, was just asking for money for a feed.

– No, this is not meat, it's cake, she said brightly. *Dose*.

But when she was reversing away and he was still staring at her and calling out to her in a soft, conspiratorial way and tugging at his dick, she wound down the window and yelled at him: *Beikten! Asu!* Cretin. You dog, you. Show some respect.

– Nya, nya, nya, he minced back.

– Didn't your mother and father teach you anything?

And at this he slouched and looked so wounded and thin that she felt sorry for him. Just a kid, she thought, just a kid, sleeping rough at Mercado Lama with his pals.

She drove out of the car park and past the Tribunal ba Rekursu. Up ahead, Camp Phoenix was lit up like a stadium under the phosphorous glow of those mandarin-coloured lights. She turned right, down towards *policia mate* and the Ministry. The intersection was quiet. And she sailed through.

SOME NIGHTS KATE would go back to Sydney. She would dream that she was standing on the shore of the Parramatta River, just west of the Gladesville Bridge and facing into the city and the water would be green and clean and pure and sweet and good enough to drink, and the slick, brown rocks underfoot were marvellous and so was the water lapping over the rocks and the sun on the water, that green, green water of the harbour. Or she would be flying; soaring with both arms outstretched over the unlovely old Cahill, while underneath, an archaeological dig was in full swing. They were excavating the ruins of a Roman road. Who would have thought, she remarked to a friend, a Roman ruin under the Cahill.

Or it was Festival of Sydney time and she would be stepping on to a ferry, which was made entirely from beautifully crafted wooden pegs that fit together like a puzzle, and on the open deck, a rangy Ned Kelly-type with wild eyes and an ill-fitting suit whispered urgently to

her and though she couldn't hear much of what he said she understood him perfectly and didn't mind him bending her ear, as they set sail for Manly.

But it was Gladesville that she dreamt about most often. She would be on that stretch of the Parramatta River, or above it on an old stone bridge and the water below and around her was always clean and always green and always a delight and when she woke, she knew it wasn't the city itself that she missed, but something else. In those dreams she was like a pebble on the shore. A stone in the arch of a bridge, a peg in a wooden boat and nothing, nothing was out of place.

AT BREAKFAST, SHE told Ato about what had happened at Mercado Lama.

– Ah, come on. You parked by yourself? Why didn't they wait for you and then you could have all come home together?

– I don't know.

– Mercado Lama's not a nice place at night. There are always kids hanging out there. Remember when the market was still there? There were problems down there every other night. That's why they moved the market. They kicked everyone out and all the traders had to move up to Hali Laran, remember?

– I just think of that area as the convention centre, I didn't think at night…

She'd always liked the name Mercado Lama, the way it threw *mercado*, market, from the Portuguese, together with *lama*, old, from the Malay and how much those two words told about the history of the place, this little Portuguese outpost on the edge of Asia.

– You can't park there at night. Not in the Mercado Lama car park. Please *noi*. A pause. What'd he say to you again?

– Naan, missus he was tugging on his thing the whole time.

– *Oh figuraun*.

They laughed.

– Don't be cross. Why are you cross?

– It's just not nice for you, that's all.

– But don't be cross.

– Promise me you won't park there again.

– Don't know if I'll go to the next one.
– Did you get any good books?
– Not a one.

THE RULE OF LAW

AT TEN THAT morning she drove over to the *Tribunal ba Rekursu* for a judgment about an appeal in a double murder case. The case rang a bell. When it hit the news back in 2009, it had even prompted a friend to email her from overseas, appalled. *Tell me this isn't true?* she wrote.

While journalists and relatives of the prisoners were still milling around outside the courthouse, a tiny old woman in a *kabaya lipa* greeted her with a courteous *bom dia* and a half bow. She *bom dia*-d back before she realised with a pang that the woman thought that perhaps she, Kate, was an official of the court, had some influence over what was about to unfold and should therefore be treated with deference.

The prisoners' relatives waited in the same manner as the families who came to see the Minister, with that same mixture of hope, faint excitement at being in the orbit of a powerful institution and resignation. The older women were wiry old birds, eyes deep set in faces hardened by a lifetime of work in the fields. They had come to court in their Sunday best, with their hair done up in immaculate buns, wearing their *morten* and all their gold jewellery. A few younger relatives had accompanied them – teenagers, also bird-like, but wearing jeans and bright T-shirts. They seemed nervously optimistic, assuming perhaps that nothing bad could come to pass in the Tribunal ba Rekursu, with its well-tended garden, gleaming cars parked under the shade of several old shade trees, the spacious and clean foyer, and polished wooden benches inside the actual courtroom.

The prison van came wailing up the street and lumbered into the car park. It stopped in front of the courthouse steps, the back door was opened and three men in red jumpsuits eased their way down from the van. They moved cautiously on account of the chains on their hands and feet, shuffling up to the steps of the courthouse. Then, in an intimate gesture, each man proffered his cuffed hands to a guard. The cuffs were unlocked and handed to

a second guard and with their leg chains still on, the prisoners shuffled over to a bench under the window of the courtroom.

Their relatives, who were gathered on the opposite side of the foyer, made no move towards the prisoners. They did not wave or signal to each other or mouth anything across the ten feet of tiled foyer that separated them.

Only the journalists, still gathered outside, continued to smoke and chat in low voices.

Then in a flurry, three men in black gowns and yellow scarves swept down the stairs and through a side door into the courtroom. The main doors to the courtroom were opened from the inside by the clerk of the court, the prisoners were ushered into the dock and the gallery filed in after them. She noted the buzz cuts on the men, which were all in different stages of growing out; and how they made the men look like children who were incapable of choosing how to wear their hair.

The Chief Justice, a diminutive man with a round, somewhat shy face, read out a long judgment in a measured monotone.

On October 6, 2009, Nelson said to Pedro, Rogério and Agostinho Neto that if they killed Bui Meta and Bui Ana, he would pay them fifty US dollars because Bui Meta and Bui Ana had in their possession witches' medicine.

He continued with a spare account of the case. The court heard that on the 6th of October two of the men went to the women's house intending to kill them. They bludgeoned the victims with a hammer, and then left them for dead. But the women were not dead and on the 6th of November, Nelson again asked two of the men to kill the women. Both Nelson and Pedro went to the women's house and there Pedro slit Bui Meta's throat, killing her. Three days later, on the 9th of November, a fourth defendant, Tiago, was walking with Bui Ana and took out his machete and slashed her repeatedly around the neck and head. He carried her body back to her house and seeing that she was still alive, he beat her repeatedly about the legs with an *alu*, a large wooden pestle used to pound grain. And so finally, the court head, *Tiago oho duni Bui Ana,* Tiago did indeed kill Bui Ana.

Then the Chief Justice talked about how, a long time ago, people in Europe also believed in witches and they caught and killed people if they suspected them of being witches. All this happened before Europeans had

reached Timor. But, he said that as Europe developed, *ema matenek*, clever people came to realise that others did not have the power to curse them.

He kept using the words *fiar sala* to refer to peoples' present beliefs about witches. The men wrongly believed, *fiar sala,* that the women were witches.

He said that people died at the hands of others, not because of witchcraft. It was possible to kill someone with a sword, a machete, an arrow, by beating them or poisoning them. Or people died because of malnutrition, illness, contagious sicknesses, because of mosquitoes, because they did not have access to clean water, or because, once they became sick, they did not go to hospital or take medicine. Illness, ignorance and fellow human beings caused sickness and suffering and death – not witches.

He then re-read each man's original sentence and each, on appeal, was given a reduced sentence. The fact that none of the men had prior convictions was taken into consideration; as were Tiago's family circumstances – the court heard that Tiago and his wife have eight children.

When the sentence for Nelson, the ringleader, was read out, he looked down at his feet, averting his eyes from the bench above and the three judges sitting at it. It was the only sign he gave that he understood what was being said, that there was any connection between him and the account of events being read out by the Chief Justice.

The Chief Justice concluded: *The Court is confident that you four and others who hear this sentence will not forget that the law forbids any person from killing another, regardless of whether they are a witch or not*.

Without ceremony, the judges stood, and as one, swept out the side door and up the steps to their chambers.

The prisoners, each of them wearing a grimace, a pained half smile to mask their shame, were led out of the court room, through the foyer and back in to the van. The siren started up and the van lumbered back out onto the street.

The prisoners' relatives were devastated, their earlier jauntiness completely crushed. The older women were slacked-mouthed in disbelief, they dabbed at the tears in their eyes with tissues, which they then balled up in their hands. One girl – was she the daughter of one of the men? – wept on the shoulder of an older relative.

No one came to speak to the relatives. No lawyer, no official from the court. The journalists eyed them warily, but did not approach them.

The men's relatives held onto each other, trying to collect themselves before they too would have to head out into the street and make their way back to the relative's house where they were staying, before taking a white *microlet* minibus back up the coast to Liquica.

BACK AT THE Ministry, a warning popped up on screen when Kate was saving her section of the project proposal. *Minor loss of fidelity*. Save anyway you bastard, she thought and hit the S key.

She took the compromised printout to another meeting about the proposal.

In the meeting room, the STA was talking to the operations manager.

– Could you talk to the drivers about body odour?

– Pardon?

– I was in the office kitchen yesterday and there were people there – I don't remember who exactly – but some of the drivers were there and there was a very strong smell. It was very unpleasant. We need to remind them to maintain their personal hygiene, to wear clean clothes and to have a shower every day.

– You want me to tell them that?

– It's not a very nice job, but you are the best person to do it. A smile. I don't speak Tetum.

– *Talk to drivers re: body odour*, said the operations manager, scribbling in her notebook. Anything else? Haircuts? Cuticle length?

– No, no, said the STA, don't embarrass them please. But if you could mention about showering that would be fantastic. Showering daily.

– They don't shower. They *mandi*. No one has a shower in their house. They have *mandis* – those big tanks in the bathroom – and they scoop water over themselves and that's how they bathe.

The STA turned to Kate.

– So. How was the case this morning? Media there?

– They were.

– Good.

– They got reduced sentences, said Kate.

– Did they? said the STA, sending a message on her phone.

– But they had no clue what it was all about. Their relatives thought they were gonna get off scot free. They thought their convictions were going to be overturned.

– Was their lawyer there, the public defender?

– The Brazilian guy.

– Prosecutor?

– The Cape Verde guy.

– Dr Casimiro. Well, if the media were there, the Chief Justice will be happy. And if the Chief Justice is happy, we're happy. He's been calling me about this for a week. He really wanted some coverage of the judgment.

– He'll get it, said Kate.

– What was the case about again? she asked, looking up from her phone.

DIFFERENT SECTIONS OF the proposal were discussed. The budget was presented. People argued for and against it.

– Tell me there's a toll-free number for domestic violence in this country? said the STA.

Silence around the table.

– Well there is, isn't there?

– Ahh, I don't think so, said one.

– Not as far as I know, said another.

– I would say definitely not, offered a third.

– Well, we need to set one up then. We could be responsible for establishing the first toll-free number for domestic violence in this country. Perhaps in the whole of Asia. Who is gonna volunteer to look into this for me?

HAMULAK

EARLY ON SATURDAY morning, Ato dropped Kate down to the UN compound. It was deserted, except for a flock of *manu fuik*, tiny birds that wheeled and cheeped above the silent kobe huts and came to rest on the large transmitter tower and then wheeled off again for another turn above the

compound. The sky was a thin blue colour flecked with wispy clouds and as she walked through the compound, feeling the last of the cool in the morning, she thought, *it won't rain, not this morning*.

When Kate got to their designated meeting place, the staff *kios*, there was no one there. She checked her phone – five past seven. The others would be more than half an hour.

Punctuality, she thought, as she sat down and studied a poster about the fish of Timor-Leste, which was tacked to the wall of the *kios*, was the curse of the Westerner in this country. And a hard habit to shake.

They set off just after seven thirty.

– Liquica villa? asked the driver.

– Liquica villa, said Kate.

They headed west – first out along Comoro Rd, then through the airport roundabout, past the shacks where they roasted coffee, past the *madres'* convention centre and bakery, through the row of ramshackle *kios* and new Chinese shopfronts selling a jumble of construction materials, past dozens of blue Timor-Telecom *tiga roda* rickshaws, loaded with soft drinks, bottled water, cigarettes, sweets and biscuits, past the bus terminal, the F-FDTL barracks and the three lakes, *Tasi Tolu*, past the Pope's statue and Dili Rock, which marked the city limits. On they drove, along the sweep of the bay at Tibar and on to the Liquica road, passing through the dry coastal savannah, with its groves of stately *akadiru-hun* trees, some of which had small wooden steps tacked into their trunks for tapping the sap of the tree, which would then be fermented into *tua sabu* and *tua mutin*, palm whisky and palm wine and sold in recycled Aqua bottles for fifty cents or a dollar.

THE MINISTRY CEREMONY for the issuing of land papers was to be held on a stony soccer field across from the old District Administrator's building.

On one side of the field were the cheap seats – five hundred plastic chairs set up under large blue tarps. Village leaders, stiff in their *Orde Baru*-style uniforms, sat at the front, along with other prominent locals and the staff of advocacy groups from Dili, while up in the narrow concrete stadium behind were family members, teenagers and other less important locals.

On the other side of the field was the VIP tent – the vinyl couch for the Minister and dignitaries, the speakers' table decorated with *tais* and the padded fold-away chairs for invited guests from Dili.

And on the fringes of the field, old women sat under the shade of gnarled frangipani trees selling cold drinks out of battered Styrofoam boxes, as well as LA Lights, small packets of biscuits and sweets. Onlookers from the town gathered on a small shady hill behind the VIP tent and kids and lithe young men clambered up a tree. There was something biblical about the scene – the onlookers perched in trees for a better view, the dusty, stony pitch dividing the VIPs and the audience, and above all, the crowd, over a thousand people in all, waiting patiently for the ceremony to start and for someone to address them.

The Minister handed out the land titles under heavy skies. Then she and the VIPs had their photos taken with the landowners, and the local media did some interviews. It wasn't until the landholders were starting to drift back to their seats and the VIPs were gathering their things for the trip back to Dili that the first fat drops of rain fell. Kate dashed over to the VIP tent and then, using her handbag as an umbrella, ran up to the car. The journalist and the lawyer were already inside.

– Well that was good timing, she remarked.

– *Hamulak*, replied the journalist.

It wasn't good luck, but prayers and offerings to the ancestors that had kept the clouds at bay until the ceremony was finished, he said.

– Their old fellas would have been praying all week and a pig or a cow would have been slaughtered for good measure, said the journalist.

– Really?

– Really, he said and laughed at how preposterous it must have sounded to her.

They drove up the hill past the ruined splendour of the Portuguese-era administrator's office, with its matching staircases sweeping down from the main doors, its wedding-cake crimping along all the eaves, and the gnarled old frangipanis out the front.

They took the left for Dili and the rain came down in opaque sheets and stilled any conversation and they turned off the AC because their clothes were damp and it was cold in the car and the driver hunched forward slightly and

eased his way along the narrow road, into potholes so large that they could sleep one or two people, and around blind corners with a short blast of the horn to warn any oncoming traffic of their presence.

Just outside Dili, the rain stopped and the northern tip of the city, Cristo Rei, appeared across the water from them, benign and bathed in pale afternoon sunshine, and the conversation turned to God.

– Are you religious? asked the journalist, leaning forward impatiently.

– Am I religious? said Kate.

– Yes, are you religious? What are you?

He didn't wait for her answer.

– Not me. I don't have a religion anymore, he said enthusiastically. I've rejected the Church and all organised religion. I'm not anything anymore.

– You've rejected the Church?

She had never heard anything like it from a young Timorese.

– But how? Why?

– My older brother – I'm the youngest of four, all boys – he left first. Then we all decided to leave the Church. We realised we didn't want to be part of any organised religion. People are such hypocrites. They go to Mass, dressed up in their best *roupa Missa*, but *hanesan deit*. He shrugged. They never change.

The lawyer piped up: Right. They walk out of Mass on a Sunday morning and they think they can do anything – fighting, gambling and, excuse me sister, even whoring – just because they went to Mass that morning.

The driver chuckled.

– *Los duni maun*. It's true brother.

– Something else I can't stand, continued the journalist, is the way people blame the devil. If they do something bad, well of course it's Satan's fault, nothing to do with them. Not me. I'm completely responsible for my own actions, good or bad. I'll never let someone else, Catholic, Protestant or Muslim, tell me what's right and what's not.

– And what about Jesus? asked the lawyer. Do you still believe in him?

– Of course I do, he said, looking offended. Jesus I love. I do. Take his teachings – I mean what's not to like. I accept his teachings. But God? The Church? Nope, I'm finished with all that.

– What did your parents say about all this? asked Kate.

– It was a shock at first. I won't deny it. They were upset when my older brother stopped going to Mass. But, once he'd explained it all to them, they calmed down a bit. By the time I stopped going to church – what could they do? They just said, 'You too, huh?'

– And do they still go?

– Of course. But here's the thing – not as much as they used to. *Uluk nunka falta, nunka sa*. Was a time they never missed a service, never. These days, like Mum, she goes on the big church days and for weddings and funerals. But she's not as devout as before.

The lawyer pounced: What about if you're getting married? You'll have no choice then. You'll have to go to Mass.

– If she really wants to get married in a church, I'll do it. But, once we're married, I won't be going regular, nothing like that, said the journalist, as if cautioning an imagined bride-to-be.

– Baptisms – what about baptisms? asked the lawyer.

– Nope, absolutely not. And another thing, we'll give our kids proper *Fataluku* names, none of these Joses and Marias and Fatimas.

– Go boy! laughed the lawyer. Proper *Fataluku* names like what?

– Mauresi, said the journalist dreamily. Mauresi and Pajaria.

From God, the talk moved on to the old padres who had been in Timor so long they had forgotten their own languages and spoke only Makasae or Baikeno, the ones who appeared not to age, who could go days without eating, shrugging off hunger, the ones who, when provoked, had a terrible, unforgiving magic, not unlike Jesus'.

Padre Richard, said the lawyer, once had a fight with the *siak* ferry master on the boat from Oecussi to Dili. They cleared the beach and put out over the deep water and Padre Richard was still furious. He grappled with it. Should he bring the ferry down in the middle of the sea and teach that arrogant *asu-fahi animal* a lesson? He could have. All he had to do, said the lawyer, was call up the seas and the seas would have obeyed and the ferry would have gone down. But when he looked around the crowded deck at all his fellow Oecussi people *no nia hanoin los sira,* he felt sorry for them. The lawyer shook his head. He couldn't do it.

– And what about the kid, the runner, back in '99. What was his name? asked the journalist.

– Lafu, said the lawyer.

– That's it, Lafu.

Kate'd heard the story too – about the young boy who ran from Oecussi to Batugade and delivered a letter to the foreign troops, begging them to come to Oecussi because the militia were still running amok there.

– Padre Richard writes the letter in English, said the lawyer, and sews it into the sole of Lafu's runners. Then he prays. *Nia hu nia ulun*.

He blew the breath of God and of *Matebian*, of all souls into the kid and sent him on his way.

– They fired at him, said the lawyer. The Indonesians shot him but the bullets just bounced off. He handed that letter over and he didn't have a single scratch on his body. Not a cut.

– Bounced off, said the journalist, rallying to the familiar story, picking up a thread and weaving some of the tale himself. *Pe-own, pe-own, pe-own*. They tried to stop him, to mow him down, but nothing touched him. He just ran on and it scared the living daylights outta them.

– They weren't game after that, nodded the lawyer.

– They were scared of him.

– Hmm, and what about the trip up to Padre Richard's house? asked the lawyer.

– It's four to five in a car. Doesn't matter if it's a Prado or a taxi or Hummer. Four to five easy. You know how long it takes the Padre?

Kate shrugged.

– An hour, easy as you please, said the journalist. Never more.

– And how about Padre Locatelli? In Fatumaca.

– Locatelli! How old is he now?

– Dunno. But he knew Xanana back when Xanana's hair was still black. Now Xanana's completely grey and Padre Locatelli hasn't aged a day. He looks exactly the same as he did thirty years ago.

– You're right. And his driver? Always has petrol in his car and a bit of change in his pocket and some *tua* in his house. The cupboards are never bare at the driver's place.

– And his old car is still going, said the lawyer. It must be forty years old but once they start it up, it can fly that old car. And they never touch it. They never have to do a thing to it.

They talked about those canny old padres all the way back into Dili, down Comoro Road and into the UN compound, and they were flying with it too, soaring with the sense of something extraordinary and inexplicable that was still in their midst.

INSIDE THE WITCH'S BELLY

– SO, MY *NOI*, how was it? asked Ato.

– Went off without a hitch. It started to rain the moment the Minister had handed out the last of the land papers. The instant she'd handed out the last certificate and everyone had had their photo taken, the rain came down.

– *Hamulak sa*.

– That's what the journalist said.

– *Pasti sa*. They would have had their *lia nain* praying all week long.

– You reckon?

– Definitely.

– Hmm.

Milly came and sat on her lap.

– You're a bit warm, darling. Ato, she's a bit warm.

– Yeah, a little bit, but she's been fine, running around all day.

– Can we have a story? asked Tanya.

– Tell us the witch story, Mummy, said Milly.

The girls lay in the bottom bunk, their heads on the same pillow.

– Now, where were we up to again?

– The witch put something under the mat and you wouldn't tell us what it is but I think she magicked them. Did she? asked Tanya.

– Right. So, the king kicked Bui Hikas out. But was she worried? Not a bit of it. She walked back down to her smelly little hut by the river, singing a little song to herself:

Won't be long

It won't be long
Kingie'll send someone along
To fetch me back
To fetch me back
To fetch me back up along this track

– AND SURE ENOUGH, that night, the king sent his man back down to get Bui Hikas.

And every night that followed too. Every night, the *luirai* sent someone down to fetch Bui Hikas. And every morning, she made sure she left after first light, walking slowly back down through the village, accentuating the sway of her growing belly, so that everyone knew that she had spent another night in the *luirai*'s house and that she was pregnant.

Then she would stay in her hut all day and no longer came to comb the daughter's hair.

– Pappa, tell her to come and comb my hair, said the daughter.

He laughed.

– Let her rest. Why can't Aunty comb your hair? Or here, let me have a go.

He picked up a comb and started to tug it through his daughter's hair.

– Ow. Ow, you're pulling. Stop it.

Late one afternoon the daughter was down by the river, washing her hair when Bui Hikas came down to fetch some water.

– Such beautiful hair, said Bui Hikas. What a lucky girl to have such beautiful hair. Poor Bui Hikas' scratchy old mane. No one ever told me I had beautiful hair. And I used to wonder, what is the only thing that would make me happier than having hair like yours? You know what the answer was? Do you know, daughter? Aww, don't scowl like that. I used to think that the only thing that would make me happier than having your long hair, would be to sleep in your Daddy's house. It's nothing like my musty old hut here – full of mosquitoes, floods when it rains and *manas fuik*, hot as a bastard during the dry. Ah, to sleep in the *liurai's* house, as his wife, now that would make me happy. I used to dream of it, all alone down here. And look – it's happened! Let me comb your hair, just for old time's sake?

She reached out, and with a small blade hidden in the palm of her hand, snipped off a lock of the girls' hair.

– Ah, cried the daughter. What've you done?

– *Karun to'o.* You are highly strung aren't you?

The girl ran back up the village, the hair standing up on the back of her neck, Bui Hikas calling after her: You wouldn't begrudge *mãe* a tiny lock of your hair would you?

That night, she sat listlessly by her father's side, playing with her hair.

– Darling, eat up. You haven't had a thing to eat.

– I don't feel well Pappa. I'm going to go to bed.

She walked across to Aunty's house, curled up on a *biti* and went to sleep.

The *luirai* was woken in the night.

– Did you come without me calling for you, you naughty thing you?

– It's not Bui Hikas, it's me, you fool, said Aunty.

– Well, what is it?

– She's not well.

He got up and went to Aunty's hut, where the girl was lying on a *biti*, pale and bathed in sweat.

– *Oan-feto*? he said and touched her forehead.

– She's been raving.

– Hmm, said the *luirai*.

– Saying things. Talking about her.

– Who? he said sharply.

– Her. Who's up at your house every night. She says Bui Hikas cut her hair, snipped off a lock of her hair.

The *liurai* scoffed.

– Girlish imagination. She was always one for tall stories. She'll be fine in the morning.

He went back to his house and tried to sleep, but couldn't. And an hour before dawn, he told his adjutant to call Bui Hikas. And she took her time coming, so that it was just light by the time she left her hut and walked the length of the village and up the wooden steps to the *luirai*'s house.

And not long after she had left again, they called him back to see his daughter.

She was writhing around and her hair was splayed out all over the mat, tangled and slick with sweat and she clutched her stomach and howled and by her bed was a foul pot with her vomit in it.

– Owwie, owwie, she called, just like she used to when she was little girl and fell and grazed her knee.

– *Oan-feto?* Darling?

She opened her eyes and looked at him so blankly that he didn't know if she had recognised him.

– *Maromak,* throw that filth out, he roared, pointing at the pot. And sponge her down for god's sake.

After an hour, he went back to his hut. And sat in the gloom. And then he thought of the child Bui Hikas was carrying and how the ancestors had sent the baby to him. And he wondered at how his initial misgivings about the mother, this Bui Hikas, had completely vanished. The child was his. That was that. And he loved that baby as he loved his own daughter. He sent for her again.

– How is the girl, my lord? asked Bui Hikas.

– Still feverish.

– You look tired.

– Come here.

He touched her belly, and it was hard and taut.

– Is it moving?

– Moving! Doesn't stop. Day and night. It's a strong little one, this one. This one, you don't have to worry about. But you should sleep.

– I couldn't sleep for thinking about her.

– *Kasian*, a father's burden eh! She stroked his brow. But she's a big strapping girl, she'll be fine.

– She was such a beautiful baby.

– Of course she was.

– Some babies are plain ugly when they're born, there's no way around it. But she was graceful from the moment she popped out. Just like her mother. Terrible labour.

He looked gloomy again.

– Bellowing for days. We couldn't sleep. None of us could sleep. Until she stopped bellowing.

And he remembered that when the girl's mother stopped her moaning, the silence, the occasional whimper that he heard from outside the hut where she lay was worse, so much worse. That quiet, he thought, would eat them both up, mother and baby.

– *Ai kuitadu!* And then the girl's mother called back by the ancestors, what a shame, but who are we to know what the ancestors want or don't want *los ka lae*? she said, a little too glibly for the *liurai*'s liking.

– If it's a girl, we'll call her after my first wife.

Bui Hikas sniffed.

– Of course. But it's a boy you know, my lord.

– It is?

She nodded and stroked his brow and he fell into a deep sleep and she hissed at anyone who came to the door to try and wake him, so that he slept all day and eventually, at sunset, he woke, and smiled at her and sat up.

– How is she? he asked sleepily.

– I'm sure she's fine. They'll be taking good care of the *luirai'*s daughter, won't they now?

He sighed.

– Such a beautiful baby she was.

– You were saying.

Aunty climbed the steps to his house and stared at him from the door.

– What is it? he asked.

– DOES SHE PUT the magic on all of them? asked Tanya.

– On some of them.

– But not the Aunty, said Milly.

– Not the Aunty.

– And does she turn good in the end? asked Milly.

– Well, you'll have to listen to find out.

– But why didn't the Daddy go and look after her?

– Because Bui Hikas put a spell on him too and all he could think about was the baby in Bui Hikas' tummy.

HE STEPPED INTO the hut and knelt down beside his daughter and held her hand. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark and when they had, he gasped. She looked waxy, almost green.

– What is it? he asked, frightened now for the first time since she had fallen ill.

Someone in the far corner spoke.

– One of them will die.

– Who's there?

The *matan dok*, the one who can see a great distance, stepped forward.

– Nature of it, he said, of this curse, this spell. One of them will die. My lord.

– One of who? asked the *luirai* testily.

Silence.

– One of who?

And the *matan dok* asked to see Bui Hikas and she was sent for a third time that day and she was pleased as punch, thinking that the *liurai* could hardly take a piss without having to call her back up to his hut, and if they were a bit rough with her as they walked her back up, she took it in her stride. Let them speak to her like this now. In a few weeks, they wouldn't dare.

But when she reached the *luirai*'s house and saw them all there, standing around waiting for her, she tried to run. She tried to run, but one of the men caught her by the wrist and yanked her hand up behind her back, until tears sprang from her eyes and she looked at the *liurai* and motioned to her belly and mouthed the words, *Please my lord*.

The *luirai* spoke to the *matan dok*.

– Do it then. Put this thing to rest once and for all.

The *matan doog* approached her, walked once around her, sniffed at her.

– Please, she mouthed. The baby.

Annoyed, the *luirai* shook his head at her, as if to say, *Don't worry, he won't touch you*.

But before anyone could stop him, the *matan dok* snatched the machete from the adjutant and with a cry, raised it above Bui Hikas belly. The *liurai* ran to stop him and Bui Hikas screamed and tried to turn away, but he was too quick and he brought the machete down hard on her stomach and there

was the thunk of the blade biting into flesh and then, with a whoosh, the contents of her belly spilled out – out came a yelping puppy, plates and cups, spoons and forks, and other detritus. The pup ran around and around in circles, whimpering, Bui Hikas fell to her knees and flailed about, one hand clutching at the ribbons of her stomach and the other trying to gather up its contents, the villagers screamed and hightailed it back to their houses, the *matan dok* calmly returned the machete to the adjutant and the *liurai* clutched his head and said softly, *Oh my baby. Oh my baby.*

I KNEW IT wasn't real, said Tanya. I knew it wasn't a real baby in her stomach. She was just tricking them, right Mum?

– She was just tricking them.

– And did she turn good after that?

– Nope, she did not.

– And what happened to her? asked Milly.

– They chased her away.

– And did the princess get better after that?

– She did. Because once they had whacked the witch's tummy, the spell was broken.

They were quiet for a moment, which Kate always took to be a good sign, a sign that they were satisfied with the story.

– Do witches exist? asked Tanya.

– I've never seen one.

– But why did Nanny say Suai was full of witches?

– Did she?

– I heard her, she said it like this, *Buan barbarak iha Suai.*

– Well, I've been to Suai and I didn't see a single witch there.

THE NEXT DAY, Milly's fever soared and dipped. Plans to go to brunch, to the beach, for a drive up to Dare to buy orchids, were shelved. It was a sick day. They stayed home and watched her.

The Oecussi kids from down the beach came and rattled their gate and asked if they could take the rubbish out for fifty cents or a dollar.

– *Malae! Malae!* called a little boy in a dirty Manchester United T-shirt.

Let me take the rubbish out.

– Don't call her *malae*, warned one of the older kids. *Hirus*. She'll get cross.

The little one paused, confused for a moment, then rattled the gate again.

– Cross! Cross! he called. Let me take the rubbish out, Cross.

In the middle of Sunday night, Milly called to her in a croaky, frightened voice. Kate went in and felt her forehead.

– Oh my poor darling, you're so hot. Are you alright? Is your head sore?

– I needa vomit.

She vomited into a blue ice cream bucket, then curled up in a ball and went back to sleep. Kate went back into their room and woke Ato.

– *Noi*? What is it? he said, sitting up.

DAYS THREE AND FOUR

IN THE MORNING, Milly was whingey and clingy and didn't want to eat; and her forehead and her feet were so hot. Kate carried her to their bed and propped her up on two pillows and as a treat, as a trade-off for the fact that she was about to walk out the door, offered her some juice.

– Do you want some juice darling? Some special juice?

The juice didn't interest her.

– Water, she said.

Kate held a cup for her. She drank and lay back down and stared back at Kate with the look that sick children give – not enquiring, neither cross nor happy, as if to say: *There it is then, I'm sick. What are you going to do about it?*

Kate kissed her forehead.

– You have a sleep and I'll be back in a couple of hours.

Her face crumpled, and she started to cry.

– Don't go, Mummy.

She drove down Pantai Kelapa, feeling both the tug of the sick child and the pull of work.

She was late. By the time she arrived they had started a final meeting on the proposal. She picked up the document and flicked through it. The toll-free number for domestic violence had survived the last round of cuts. The national martial arts competition was there too. But the printing of legal

textbooks for university students had been cut.

– What happened to the books for the uni students? asked Kate.

– Had to go, said the STA. We can't demonstrate stakeholder engagement from simply handing out books to university students. If we were going to do anything like that, it would have to go through the Rector's office or the association of law faculties.

– But there is no association of law faculties, said Kate. That's why the students approached us directly.

– It's not for us, something like that. Smells more like UNESCO. Tell the students to try UNESCO. Anyone want to raise anything else?

Kate would tell the girls another story about the *luirai*'s daughter, she thought, and about the sort of princess she grew up to be. And she would ask Milly to give her a name. Milly would christen her *Faridia* or *Nicey* or *Shinier-as-bright*. And then Milly would beg for Bui Hikas to come back.

– With a baddie, Milly would caution, before Kate started the story.

– You remember Bui Hikas…

– Did she come back?

– She did.

– But not too bad a baddie, okay?

– So, continued the STA, if there are no more comments, we'll make some final formatting changes and get this off ASAP. I don't need to remind you that we'll be competing with offices right around the region for this money. But, what we have here is far and away more interesting than…

A phone started to ring.

– …than…Whose phone is that?

Kate fished the phone out of her bag.

– Sorry everyone, excuse me, she said and stepped outside to take the call. It was the nanny.

– Hallo? *Nusa'a?* What's up? she asked. Okay, okay…I'm coming.

She eased her way back to her seat and started gathering up her papers.

– …and it was when I was in New York, said the STA, that I realised, I saw with my own eyes, that what we are doing here, on a minuscule budget, on such a pathetic budget really, is more impressive than anything anyone else –

Kate got up as quietly as she could and made for the door again.

– You're leaving? asked the STA.

– It's my daughter.

– Your daughter?

– She's sick.

– She's sick?

– She's vomiting and she's been very hot and –

– And you don't have anyone looking after her?

And Bui Hikas would be the girl's nemesis. And they would meet often. Bui Hikas would fly down to the village from a nearby mountain and the girl would have to fend her off. She would be a menacing presence, but not too menacing. As Milly reminded her often, *Not too bad a baddie, okay?*

– We do, said Kate. We do have someone looking after her. But I still have to go.

THEY SAT THAT night by her, as she lay in their bed. They sat hunched on the cane chair beside her or perched on the edge of the mattress and they changed her compresses and they gave her Panadol when she'd take it and she was so hot, so terribly hot, even with the Panadol she was up to 39 and 38.9 and never less than 38.8 and they changed the compresses and tried to get her to drink water. And when they could, they slept beside her and every time she stirred, they would fling themselves awake, afraid that she was going to vomit and she did vomit, three, or was it four, times and when the roosters were crowing and the little birds, the *manu fuik*, were cheeping in the Balinese trees next door, they agreed that they would take her down to the UN clinic, that it was the safest bet and it was clean and their pathology was reliable and they packed a bag with a sarong, water, a washer, her Froggie, some biscuits and mandarins and Kate picked her up and sat with her in the front seat, as Ato put the bag in the back seat and reversed out of the driveway and drove out of the *bairo*, past Senhor Miguel's house, along the waterfront, out to Pertamina and then down Pantai Kelapa and Milly was silent the whole time, so flat, and though they tried to joke with her and cajole her, she said nothing and when they parked outside the UN and carried her inside and sat down in the clinic waiting room, she said nothing but she took a little sip of water, a

tiny sip, and said: *Nuff* and was silent again.

Oh great, said the paediatrician. Oh that's just great. Now I'm going to have to admit the child to the UN hospital. You better tell me her age then.

– Four.

– Weight? Never mind. We'll weigh her. We'll weigh her when we admit her. Allergies?

– No.

– Vomiting?

– Yes.

– How many times?

– Four. Four times last night.

– Drinking?

– A little.

– A little. And this is day what? Of the fever?

– Day four I guess.

– Day four and now the child is dehydrated and I'm going to have to admit her. I don't like this dengue business. We don't have it in my country and I don't like it at all. And we'll have to bleed her too.

– Bleed her?

– Screen. For dengue. And for malaria.

– A blood test you mean?

– Any rash?

– No, no rash.

– No, you don't expect a rash on day four. If we have dengue, the rash will come later.

The doctor opened the door and called to a nurse and then the nurse stepped inside and said: Come. This way.

Kate hesitated.

– Go, said the doctor, with a shooing motion. The nurse has the paperwork.

Questions were wheeling slowly across Kate's mind. What? she wanted to ask. Will you? she wanted to ask. Can we, she thought, can we put her in your care? We can, but if we do, will you take care of her?

The doctor looked at her, exasperated.

– Go, said the doctor. Oh, what time is it. She checked her watch. Almost twelve, no wonder I'm so hungry. Now, go up there and let me see… I'll come and check on her after lunch. Around 3 pm? I don't like it, one, little, bit. With dengue you have to bleed the child. Bleed, bleed, bleed. You need to bleed the child every day. It's the only way. We do not have it in my country. Malaria we have, but not this dengue. I'd never even heard of it before I came here. The doctor laughed. And what a year to come to this country. Right in the middle of an epidemic and myself, I'd never seen a case before in my life.

DARWIN AND BACK

FROM THE SIXTH floor of the Royal Darwin Hospital she looked out over a car park and then a road, then scrub and then the water, the blue and brown and milky water of the Darwin foreshore. When Milly was sleeping, Kate would go to the window and watch the cars meandering below and wonder at the orderly manner in which they drove and how new all the cars looked and how clean and wide the roads were.

They were in a four-bed ward. Next to Milly's bed was Tyson, from Groote Eylandt. Tyson had long, thick eyelashes and was a dab hand at the ukulele, which the rec staff brought around the ward once a day, along with balloons and face paint and party hats. Tyson had shoved some stones in his left ear and they had gone in so far that he had to be flown up to Darwin to get them out. Directly opposite Milly was an older boy, Stewart, who had a kidney infection and who went to school in the ward every day between the hours of nine and two.

And for their first two days there, she watched Tyson running around and saw Stewart come and go, and Milly did not even speak to Kate, so exhausted was she.

When the doctors came on their rounds, or when Kate got back the results of a test, she would text Ato in Dili. *Platelets dropping. Platelets stable. Platelets up today!* She was never sure if platelets were really the nub of the illness but they were a handle for her, a yardstick, something measureable and finite and therefore comforting, especially once they started to rise again.

And on their third day in Royal Darwin, she knew that they'd turned a corner – Ato arrived on the morning flight and Milly started to play a little with Froggie, which they had bought with them to the airport on the afternoon they decided that they had to get her out of the UN hospital.

To the nurses and the admin staff who came around with brown clipboards asking for a Darwin address, Kate explained that they lived in Dili.

– We weren't happy with the care over there, so we got on a plane and came across, she would say.

– Expensive though.

– Guess so. But the medical care over there is…

And they would wait, interested to hear about the hospitals and clinics in Dili. But how to explain? Where to begin?

– It's a mixed bag, that's for sure, said Kate.

– Yeah? We've had a couple of kids with dengue come over this year.

She nodded.

– There's a lot of it around. An epidemic, they say.

– And how far is it on a plane?

– An hour.

– An hour? 'Zat all?

It wasn't far, they would agree. Closer even than Bali.

And yet it seemed to Kate that it *was* a long way away, Pantai Kelapa and Comoro Road, *policia mate* and the boys selling *pulsa* on the SAPT corner and selling fish on the seawall opposite the American embassy, and their little house, their little house on the corner, which caught the sea breeze and in which she heard those *manu fuik*, the tiny wild birds, singing every morning from the tall, green trees above the grave of their neighbour's son.

Christine Kearney has worked as a writer, editor and communications consultant in Sydney, Indonesia and East Timor. She currently lives in Dili, East Timor with her partner and their two children.

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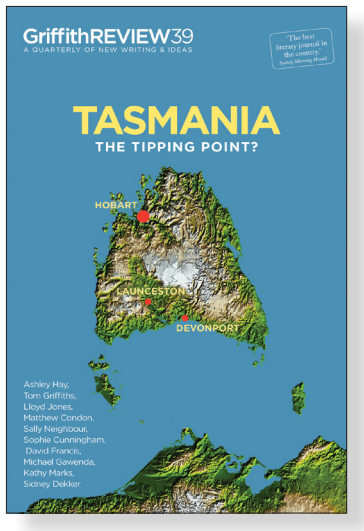

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