

Dana Miltins

## You Are Here

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They're staying in a caravan, for a bit: *She* and *He*. A bed at one end and a built-in air con that's been fighting a losing battle since the eighties. The old caravan opens onto a tin-roofed annex: shade cloth wrapped around the supporting posts for walls, a flyscreen door and paving stone floor. An offcut of carpet designates lounge from kitchen. An armchair, once beige, is rust-coloured from the dust – so are their sneakers, and the sheets, and the washing on the line. You learn to live with it, same as the flies. [...]

Beyond the caravan park the desert reaches into forever. Facing west Kata Tjuta and Uluru<sup>1</sup> rise like breaching whales on a red ocean. They say this whole place was once an inland sea, which is hard to imagine now because it's summer and even the Mutitjulu<sup>2</sup> waterhole is a pan of cracked earth.

He came here a few months ago, for a job: "outback resort seeks night security officer, no experience necessary". He liked the idea of something different, easy. He liked the idea of being alone. He wanted to try out the world without her. To see. He'd told her it was an opportunity to save. For a house, maybe. For the two of them.

For three months she stayed in their half-empty flat. She did girls' nights and detox diets. But the smell of him was still in the cupboard and she found herself standing in there sometimes with his winter clothes and the door closed. She doesn't have time to start all over again. She wants a baby, and soon.

And so she arrived unannounced on an afternoon right before Christmas. For a "holiday", or at least that's what she told her friends. This was (absolutely) the most wild and romantic thing she had ever done. On the flight, she'd imagined exactly how it would go. The way she would stand. The words she would say. The casual, cool tone of it all. From there she had imagined his unmistakable look, and a whole spectrum of sex positions. It would be a story to tell, one day. "You were made in a caravan, in the middle of nowhere..."

In reality, however, a wasp had ruined everything. A wasp like a huge airborne mouse – like nothing she had ever seen before. He opened the flyscreen to her cowering on the doormat with her hands covering her head. "Get away from me". These were not the words she had practiced.

"What are you doing here?"

This was not the tone she'd imagined. His bare torso, rounder than it used to be, told the story of a life without her. Of toast and beer.

All day he sleeps. All night he works. There is no going outside for outside is like a vast, intolerable sauna and so in daylight hours they lie naked between the air con and the fan. Cabin fever<sup>3</sup> is setting in and her restlessness makes him crazy. He needs to sleep but he can't sleep for the extra heat in the bed, and the hands that wander across his skin. Between her fingers and the bugs, he is always swatting at something.

It has been four days since her arrival and they have made love only once. This is not because she has not been trying but because her trying is unattractive. "If you'd stop pushing me," he says, "you're always pushing me." He can sense what she's doing. He knows what she wants. But the truth is he never thought she would come here, and he already has two children to his last girlfriend and all he knows of them is that they cost him a hundred and fifty dollars a week. That's an entire shift right there.

He gets up and gets dressed for work. She gets up and boils him two eggs with white bread toast cut into soldiers<sup>4</sup>. The sunset makes the whole world orange. There is so much beauty in this place. She can see it but she can't feel or understand it. There is a list of emergency numbers pinned to the rusty fridge by a magnet that has a picture of space on it. Millions of tiny white stars and a pointer to one of them that says,

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<sup>1</sup> *Kata Tjuta and Uluru*: large rock formations in the desert near Alice Springs, Central Australia

<sup>2</sup> an Australian Aboriginal settlement near Uluru and Kata Tjuta

<sup>3</sup> *cabin fever*: a claustrophobic reaction to isolation in a confined space

<sup>4</sup> *toast soldiers*: thin strips of toast

“YOU ARE HERE”. This, she feels and understands. She is a speck. A fleck of sand in an endless desert. So close to nothing.

When he leaves for work he reminds her to take a torch if she goes out. She takes it as a sign of his love. But she’s afraid to go out alone. The caravan is enclosed and off the ground, and last night she sprayed  
45 around the windows and the door. She takes a box of Just Right<sup>5</sup> and eats it in bed, dry. In her imagination, she redecorates: a rug, new sheets (those linen ones), and an Aboriginal painting above the bed.

At midnight she wakes, drenched in sweat and needing the toilet. The block is only twenty metres down the row but she dreads leaving the caravan. She takes the torch from next to the bed and shines a light on each step before taking it. She approaches the flyscreen door knowing that just beyond, out in the world,  
50 there is a small huntsman<sup>6</sup> that spends its nights on the doormat. The regularity of its position and the fact that he has named it, like a dog, has so far saved its life. Killing Rex, she feels, would be to admit failure and she won’t do that. The light finds the spider, but something is different tonight. Rex’s front legs and head are raised. She lets the beam follow the direction of Rex’s viewpoint and the light catches the long brown body laid out across the path. Instinct causes her to scream, then run. She slams the flyscreen door, bolts  
55 up the caravan steps, slams the caravan door, and falls onto the floor with her heart lifting the skin off her chest. A snake.

In the presence of a snake stand still and silent. This is what she has been told. In stillness you pose no threat, but how to remember that in the moment? She has done the wrong thing. It feels like a test and she has failed. She wants to cry but she has to pee, so bad. Think. Think. There’s a packet of pads with her  
60 toiletries in the milk crate. She unwraps six of them placing them next to each other on top of a plastic bag. Holds up her T-shirt and squats. The relief. She looks up at the ceiling and begins to cry. The universe is sending her a sign, she thinks. It has all been one big mistake, coming here. She isn’t cut out for this... place. She will clean up her piss, she will call the snakecatcher, and then tomorrow she will book a flight home. She gathers up the plastic bag around the wet pads, opens the caravan door and races for the emergency  
65 numbers under the YOU ARE HERE magnet.

The snakecatcher’s troopy<sup>7</sup> pulls up in ten. She calls to him from the top step of the caravan. “I’m in here”. His steps are close to silent but she tracks the beam of his torch around the shade cloth to the flyscreen door. He’s in dusty denim and old Air Jordans<sup>8</sup>. He looks exactly as a snakecatcher should look: cool and sure. “Where is it?” he asks. His smile glows in the dark.

70 “It’s right over there somewhere.”

She steps down from the caravan, to take hold of his forearm, which could rival her thigh in width. “Somewhere there”, she says, holding onto him tighter. The snakecatcher raises his torch. The snake is meandering up the path, unfazed, towards the block. The snakecatcher hands her the torch and his special snakecatching bag that looks something like a heavy-duty butterfly net. “Only a python,” he says, “Not  
75 deadly.”

As silent and fluid as the snake itself, the snakecatcher moves in behind the python. Sensing his presence, the snake pauses, turns to look back, questioning this interruption. The snakecatcher is fast and gentle. He reaches for the tail, catches it and stands up, raising his arm so that the snake dangles free from the ground. It is helpless now, this beautiful length of striped brown muscle. It must be close to two metres  
80 long and she’d be lucky to reach her two hands around its middle. The snakecatcher strokes the belly of the snake with his free hand and says something to it in a language that she cannot understand. Then he lifts the snake to cradle it in his arms.

“Fertility snake,” he says, “Kuniya.” In his culture, sacred. He points out the tiger stripes and the size of its head and all the while Kuniya is moving slowly through his arms and hands, enjoying his touch as if  
85 they’re casual lovers. He takes the handle of the bag from her and lowers Kuniya in. On its way down, he

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<sup>5</sup> *Just Right*: an Australian breakfast cereal

<sup>6</sup> a large spider

<sup>7</sup> Australian slang for an all-terrain vehicle

<sup>8</sup> *Air Jordans*: Nike trainers

lets her touch the smooth pale belly. She holds the bag for him while he ties it shut; she is astounded by the weight. She wants to know what will happen. He explains that he will drive far enough away and let Kuniya go. She offers him a beer first.

90 In Tjukurpa<sup>9</sup>, the Python Woman, Kuniya, lived far away to the east of Uluru but when it came time for her to have babies she wanted them to be born in the same sacred place where she had been born. So she carried her eggs around her neck, travelling for days across the desert to a cave at Uluru where she carefully laid them down.

Kuniya is in the bag on the lounge-room floor between them, unmoving, asleep maybe. She believes she can feel Kuniya's energy. It seeps into her. She too has come a long way to this place.

95 When Kuniya heard that her nephew had been speared by a group of poisonous snake men, she left the cave to search for him. The Liru<sup>10</sup> men had fled towards Kata Tjuta, except for one. When Kuniya asked about her nephew, he laughed. And so Kuniya began a ritual dance, picking up the earth and putting it on herself: drawing its power, harnessing her rage. She struck the Liru man with her wana<sup>11</sup>, killing him; and then she carried the body of her nephew to the Mutitjulu waterhole where they were transformed into wanampj<sup>12</sup>.

At sunrise, *He* returns from his shift to find a parade of empty beer bottles on the lounge room floor. [...] She's alone in the bed, damp and twisted, like the sheets. He gives her a shove. Her eyelids flicker. He pulls at the sheet and she groans. "Who were you with?" he wants to know. She flexes her fingers, working her way out of a dream.

105 There is a glass of water on the bedside table. He picks it up and dumps it over her face. Her eyes open to a spinning, spluttering world. "What are you doing?" she says.

"Who were you with?" he wants to know.

She tries to sit herself up but he pushes down on her chest with his hands, holding his weight on her. "Who were you with?"

110 "Ouch" she cries out. "No one. I wasn't with anyone."

She tries to explain. There was a snake and then a snakecatcher. He stayed for a beer and they talked. "That's it. He's a friend. You wanted me to make friends."

It makes him laugh that she could be so stupid.

"It's not like that," she says.

115 But there's something lost about the way he's laughing. The way his laughter seems to turn inwards. He's gone somewhere, even though he's right there pushing on her chest.

Her stomach rises into her throat, beer and Just Right, but she holds on, reaches out for him. "Baby, please, listen." He stands up and steps away from her, catching his heel in the cord of the fan, which crashes to the floor. It lies on its side, the blades whining, until he kicks it enough to make them stop. "I HATE THIS FUCKING THING." Then he slams the caravan door. Jealousy, she thinks, could be a good sign.

120 It is six-thirty in the morning and he is going to have one of his beers that he bought. He makes his way to the kitchen knocking an empty over on his way and a whole line of them topple like dominoes. The clatter of glass splits open the silence, and on the lounge-room floor a bag, like a heavy-duty butterfly net with the top tied off with a piece of rope, begins to move of its own accord. It catches his eye.

125 Out the back of the caravan park there's a small clearing: a square of red dust with a lone desert oak at one end. The tree would be close to a thousand years old. It has seen the world change and now it has a basketball hoop nailed into its trunk. Sometimes he comes out to play but today he dumps a shovel and the

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<sup>9</sup> in Australian Aboriginal mythology: the creation period when ancestral beings created the world

<sup>10</sup> tribe of Aboriginals

<sup>11</sup> digging stick

<sup>12</sup> a mythical water snake

bag in the dust. He takes off his shirt. Skin burnt deep red: a flesh singlet. He takes a long swig of beer and then for kicks pours some over the bag. "You like that?"

130 The bag writhes, which makes him laugh in that strange internal way. Then he places his beer in the sand and takes up the shovel. Raising it above his head, he brings the shovel down on the Python Woman. Again. Again. Again. Until the bag is dead still. Until a brown-red liquid seeps through the canvas. And then again. And again. To be sure. The Kuniya is gone. Then he sits in the dust and finishes his beer. [...]

135 When he returns she is drinking tea, stuck somewhere between staying and going. She'd like to be the person who just packs up and leaves, but she's the person who makes breakfast and initiates a conversation. The kitchen table is set. Salt and pepper, and toast cut into dipping soldiers. But they'll be useless now, he's taken so long to return that her eggs are overdone. He drops the bag at her feet and sits down to watch as she takes it in: all the brown blood. "You don't need to be afraid," he says, "I killed it."

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