

## *Cross-Country*

It's the language that gets you. The way it tells you you're through a portal, just when a portal, a doorway — something, anything — is exactly what you're groping around in the dark for. And the idea of links: such a sly touch, coming at the precise time you feel that every link in your life is sundered, every piece of the chain snapped apart. Links are what you're after; linked hands, connections, answers, the web like a big stretched safety net. So you point and click. After all, you've got all the time in the world now.

Peeled. That's how you feel, when it happens. Flayed. People who tell you to get out and move on, they're standing there in a thick layer of skin, cushioned and comfortable, brimming with their easy clichés like something off a desk calendar. *What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Living well is the best revenge. You were too good for him anyway.* There's a queue of their text messages on my phone. *Call anytime, they say, if you need to talk.*

I don't know about you, but I don't need to talk. I need someone else to talk. I need answers. I wrap myself in the spare-room quilt, and watch the screen verify my password and let me in. Like a bouncer, taking pity on me, eyes sweeping my try-hard clothes and unclicking the rope barrier with nothing but disdain.

Live in the world, and there'll be a trail you leave behind you, even if it's a trail of crumbs. That's what they call them, don't they? Cookies. No matter how vigilantly you try to cover your tracks, they'll be there. The recorded minutes of a meeting you attended, some team you've been on; there's your name on the screen. Try it for yourself and see. Google your name, in one of these extended empty sessions of free time when the cursor's waiting like a foot tapping, and there's nothing else in the universe you can think of that you need to find out about. There you suddenly are, undertaking all the trivial pathetic things you think are hidden, so that anyone in the world can see you exposed.

My workmates ring me and pretend I'm on some kind of sabbatical or planned holiday, assure me that all I need is a nice long rest. Rest — here

alongside the looted stack of cookbooks and the depleted pile of unwanted, rejected CDs.

It takes a special kind of thoroughness, a particular grim determination to sever all ties, for him to redirect even his superannuation statements and subscriptions to his new address. Even the mail he would have thrown away immediately never arrives now, suggesting that he'd do anything rather than leave a single excuse for re-contact.

So I am reduced to this: typing in his name. A man of forty-two, a successful man with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, a man armed, let's face it, with the cream of the recipe books, kitchen utensils, bed linen (*I've only taken what I'm sure is mine*) and CDs he's picked through, a man unable to disguise the excess of his baggage — that man shouldn't be hard to locate. It's not as if I'm going to go over there, drive past his house, lie on his lawn drunk and make a scene, harass him. It's just a few shreds of information I want. I supported him for a year, after all; surely I have a right to know whether he's finally submitted that thesis and where, incidentally, the graduation ceremony is to be held. If he's joined a church group or a golf club, I need to paste that into my new identikit. I'll take any crumb, any trail, any vague lead.

What I really want is a chatroom. Under the cloak of the spare-room quilt, all I would do is eavesdrop, just for the sound of his voice. Well, not the sound, of course, but the cadence. Ideas expressed without that clipped and guarded reservation he abruptly adopted: *I think it's pointless considering mediation at this stage. I think it would be best to make a clean break. I think it's clear to both of us it's not working.*

It's 2.30 in the morning when I enter the portal, stoop to the keyhole and whisper the name that turns the deadlock.

I don't know why they call it surfing. They should call it drowning.

Down through the layers of US family-tree pages and rambling travel blogs of dull strangers, I hit paydirt at last. My heart knocks in my chest. I find he's attended a conference, but not presented a paper there. Thesis still unfinished, then. Too many emotional upheavals. His thoughts too scattered after a traumatic breakup, distracted by guilt and second thoughts. I'm settling into this train of thinking, hungry for its possibilities, as I spoon up the dregs of the instant noodles from my styrofoam cup, grimacing at the taste of polystyrene that permeates them no matter what sachet of pseudo-flavour you sprinkle in.

I could of course tip this dehydrated space food into a real mug before I pour on the boiling water, but that suggests a familiarity with habitual loneliness that even I draw the line at.

See, this is the difference. Your partner dies, and everyone comes over with casseroles; they clean your house and hang out your washing. Your partner leaves, though, and you don't need nurturing, apparently; you need avoiding. Your washing grows mouldy in the machine, your friends who told you that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger look at you uneasily, taking in your greasy hair and unwashed pyjamas, and leave you to go back to bed at 5 p.m. Impossible to explain to them the humming, welcoming warmth of the screen later, the peaceful blue light, the endless possibility of an explanation that would make sense.

There's the full name, match sixteen of about three thousand red herrings. He's on some kind of roster. *Show cached text only*. A roster for a sporting club. Not interstate, then. Just the other side of the city, probably. One of those beachside suburbs he always said he'd like to live in. The banner across the top of the page shows that it's a cross-country running club.

I sit back in the quilt in my chair, staring at that page. Obviously no time for the doctorate. Not when he's decided it's time for some social contact, time perhaps to get fit, to shed academia a little, to make some new friends who don't know the disastrous details of the last few months. I picture him struggling up a hill, panting, grateful for the after-parties and barbeques, the light-hearted neutral banter of friendly competition. Or maybe punishing himself, pushing himself to physical exhaustion so that he can sleep nights. Running from something — that's it. Can't he see the symbolism?

It's ten past four. Jittery with caffeine and MSG, I snoop in the desk drawer Google has no qualms about throwing open for me. He's way down the ladder: coming thirty-fourth. That must be humbling. Thirty-fourth in a field of what — fifty or so? That would make anyone feel like a nameless nobody in a crowd, a face blurry in the back of someone else's photo, reduced to nothing but pixels.

'See, you can reduce all this to just a system of binaries,' I remember him explaining when he showed me how the computer was programmed. 'Just infinite combinations of zero and one.' I wonder if he understands that better now, struggling home in the middle of the pack. How it feels

to be rendered, finally, to those low-resolution dots of shadow and light, a conglomeration made up of nothing and one.

‘Getting fit how?’ demands Julie from work when she rings. ‘Volleyball? Aerobics?’

No, I tell her, I need something bigger, more of a challenge. I’m just going to start out with light jogging, then join some kind of club. Some kind of running club.

‘Running? Are you serious?’

‘Sure. I’m going out today to buy the shoes.’

There’s a short film looping in my head and, in it, I’m pounding easily along over a hilltop in an interclub event. I’m not even puffing as I overtake him, despite the spurt he puts on. He glances sideways; he sees it’s me. I flash him a surprised-yet-calm smile of recognition, a flutter of the fingers, and pull away. Later, at the picnic, I’ll turn when he approaches, and let that awkward moment stretch out. In some versions, I have a little trouble placing him, so that there’s the slightest hesitation before I say his name. Then I ask him how his thesis is going, and watch his face fall.

Any day now, I think as I lie heavy as a stone under the quilt, I’ll go out and buy those shoes.

From the thin stack of discarded CDs, I pull out the country-and-western collection a girl group sold us one night at the pub. They were great, those girls. Big hair and pointy boots and, up close, plenty of in-your-face eyeliner and juicy-fruit lipstick as they laughed and signed my CD. He hadn’t liked them, though. Didn’t like the venue (too smoky), didn’t like the audience (nobody there to converse with about Thesis), didn’t even feel comfortable ordering a couple of beers at the bar. All twitchy about the two guys playing pool, the ones who might have even had a dance with me or at least found it in themselves to relax and enjoy some live music.

‘You’re not playing that Tammy Wynette Hormone Band again, are you?’ he’d say when he came out of the study, irritable and peaky, mind on higher things. ‘Jesus, it’s like three cats being strangled.’

I put them on now and hear that mandolin, their harmonies start up. *The high lonesome sound*, they’d called it in the song’s intro, as I’d smiled apologetically at the guys at the pool table while one of them held

out a cue to me and raised his eyebrows, that smile never leaving his face. I'd shaken my head. High lonesome, and high and dry, standing there with a guy who checked his watch every three minutes and coughed pointedly all the way home.

*Oh, I'm too far gone*, they sing now through the speakers as I turn up the treble and fiddle with the volume. *I know I've loved you too much for too long, but I'm too far gone*.

*Take care, Rebecca*, they'd written on the CD cover when I'd handed over my twenty bucks, *and enjoy!* Take care — that's good advice. Like all the revelatory news I've received over the last three months, all the bombshells — *I'm leaving*, say, or the doctor's blunt, *You're depressed* — it comes in a handy two-word dispatch, so there's no excuse for not paying attention.

What are they doing now, those girls, I wonder. Not surfing the web all night eating two-minute noodles in a pair of stretched tracksuit pants, I'll bet. When they'd sung those words, they'd sounded sincerely sorrowful, but their cowboy hats and red fingernails had said otherwise. They'll be fast asleep, ready to rise late and meet each other for breakfast at a street cafe, wearing sunglasses, wondering whether to have the hash browns or the bacon.

All I need to do is get up, wash my hair and dress and go to the mall to buy the shoes, and I can get started. I need that torso tight as a rubber band, my number tied and flapping across my chest, my shapely arms working like pistons as I make him eat my dust. That's the main thing.

What do you actually do in a cross-country run? I have a hazy picture of splashing across streams and jumping fallen logs, slogging up muddy hillsides and crashing down the other side through rugged bush. Climbing racks of tyres bound together with rope. No, wait — that's the army. Do you follow a system of flags, or does someone give you a map? Do they start you off with the crack of a gunshot, abrupt as a slap in the face or the slamming of a door?

I wonder too if there's a back-up vehicle, some support staff who tail-gun the runners, just in case you fall into a puddle or a ditch and lie there overwhelmed with the pointlessness of it all, the ludicrous challenge you've imposed on yourself, your foolish, desperate need for purpose. I imagine being lifted from the dirt by kind hands, and given a bottle of Gatorade and a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. Oh, I would give in

without even a pretence of fighting spirit if someone offered to drive me to the finish line. Who wouldn't?

I'm shaken from this reverie by a phone call from my boss, ringing me to remind me that my sick leave has run out and I need to return to work the following Monday. Until now I've let his calls go through to the answering machine. This time I finally lift the receiver.

'How are the stress levels?' he says. All casual. 'Getting plenty of sleep?'

'I was dozing when you rang, actually.'

'Good on you. That sounds like just what the doctor ordered.'

No. What the doctor ordered is still an unfilled prescription in my wallet as I self-medicate with net-surfing and the Tammy Wynette Hormone Band. I wander into the study as he talks, my fingers absently, lovingly, grazing the keyboard of the computer. Double-click on the internet icon, go straight to the club site. Last week's results are posted, and there he is, placed forty-second now. A nagging cold, maybe. Slipping down the ladder into numb mediocrity, driving back to his new beachside apartment to sit slumped on the new Ikea sofa and wonder bleakly whether he should open a couple of those cardboard boxes, pull out the old photos from where he's hidden them, and then, and then ... swallow his pride to pick up the phone. He'll ring late, sheepish and sad, voice thick with tears. Ask me if I feel like some Thai takeaway, or just a bottle of wine. If we could talk. It seems so possible, so likely, I feel my throat tighten in anticipation.

'Rebecca? Hello?' My boss is still on the line.

'I'm here,' I say. 'Monday morning, then.'

'We're all looking forward to having you back.'

'I'll bring in something for morning tea,' I say.

So what I'm going to do, I'm thinking, since I have every right to, nothing to do with him, is ring the club and ask about joining. I'm looking for a phone number I can try, and I refresh the screen and start again.

It's amazing, isn't it, the level to which we'll invent what we need. I'm actually expecting that phone call, the high lonesome sound I'm certain will come, from a man beaten into remorse and resignation after a day's cross-country running.

I've convinced myself of it, despite knowing that he hated sport so much — it's coming back to me now — that he couldn't even bring himself to pick up a cricket bat at a family barbeque in all the time we were together. Couldn't jump up and have a good-natured hit, couldn't have a simple game of pool, couldn't bear ever doing anything he wasn't an expert at. The portal opens, and his name is listed again, his beloved, lost, unique name, but I suddenly notice that this list is headed by a title I've somehow missed on the cached page.

Just two small words again, going off in a blinding flash like a grenade. What they say is: *Under-fourteens*.

I sit staring at them, dully open-mouthed. It's like being doused with a sheet of muddy water, like a final jarring stumble on wrenched ankles. I take in a gulped breath at the sensation of some huge gaping distance being covered, a long stretch of terrain rushed through with a whiplash jerk, and then, as it all skids to a halt, my face cools as if raised to a merciful and unexpected breeze.

Click on the icon, close the screen. *Windows is shutting down*. I almost hear it, the decisive thud as it hits some imagined sill somewhere. I need a shower, and then I need a long cold drink of something at an outdoor table, but first I linger, watching the innocuous sky-blue screen. I'm waiting for the little melody it always plays before it sighs and switches itself off, that melancholy minor-key tune that tells you that whatever you've been watching, ready or not, it's time to roll the credits.