Some Tests Wayne Macauley



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## MORNING / THE LOCUM

A garbage truck, a whine and a thump. Tuesday. She was still half-asleep. He'll be here shortly, said David. He kissed her forehead: I've got to go. The curtains were still drawn. After that she must have dozed because the next thing the curtains were open and a different man was standing above her. A stranger, not David. I'm the locum, he said. A long, horse-like face with a grey ponytail down his back. Your doctor had nothing available, he said, so your husband rang us. The front door was open. I've brought my intern, Hui. I hope you don't mind. This is Hui. Beth pushed herself up on the pillows—no, the man with the ponytail was not the only one in the room, there was another, Asian, short, twenties, holding a spiral-bound notebook. He smiled, then looked to his superior for advice.

I was just telling Hui about the worried well, said the locum. Not that I've already put you in that class, but we can't

discount it either. The patient presents—sorry, I'm talking to Hui again now—the patient presents as someone who is, medically speaking, in *rude health*, but at the same time she exhibits symptoms with no detectable pathology: slight headache, dizziness, a heaviness in the limbs, an overall sense of what we might call *unrightness*. Nothing we can put our fingers on and nothing she can put hers on either. A bird in search of a cage. He took off his stethoscope and rolled it up.

We worry about not being well, Hui, he said, because we can. If a greater worry was where to find our next meal, provide for our family, find shelter or even just a place to rest we would not have so much time to wildly imagine our possibly imaginary symptoms' imaginary causes or go online every evening after the kids are in bed to see if our imaginings have any basis in fact. Self-diagnosis as *perpetuum mobile*; once you get on that worry-go-round, Hui, it's hard to get off.

He looked down. You can put your top on now, he said. Beth felt under the covers—no, nothing. She moved the hand down further—yes, undies. The locum held out her pyjama top: Beth buttoned it up. *Had they examined her in her sleep?* Don't worry, he said, your husband has taken the kids.

The autumn sun was on the bedroom window, a bird was warbling in the tree outside. A train—her train?—was *clackclacking* over the bridge. She couldn't remember opening the curtains; her work clothes were still on the back of the chair. She put a hand to her hair. *Am I awake*? The intern closed his notebook, the locum snapped his briefcase shut. All right, he said, we need to send you off for some tests.

She'd first noticed it yesterday at work; it must have been around three or four. It was nothing much, it was hardly even there, a feeling so slight it could on any other day have passed unnoticed. *A little off-colour*—as if there were indeed a correct colour, a right human colour, and this a deviation from it. Your colour is red and you wake up feeling a little pink. She went to the bathroom, washed her face. An awful time of day, as everyone knows—in some parts of the world they just give up and go to sleep. *Good idea! A glass of wine and a nice lie-down*. What of any value in any workplace had ever been achieved between those dreaded hours of three and five? Lethargy, apathy, or worse, as now, the overwhelming feeling that if I don't lie down soon and close my eyes some awful germ, harbinger of some awful future sickness, will get inside my blood and lay me up for days.

Georgia came in—she was just finishing her break too. You look terrible, she said; go home, things are quiet, Lyn won't mind. She closed the cubicle door. Beth listened to her pissing. No, I'm okay, she said.

But she did go home early. She rang David and asked could he pick up the girls and in the quiet of the afternoon she drew the bedroom curtains and slid under the covers. Later, she heard them arriving home and, a little later again, Letitia and Gemma creeping in—Lettie, seven, all serious and mature; Gem, five, funny, and naughty too. They wanted to show her the drawings they'd done. They pushed up hard against the bed. Look, look! said Gemma. Me first, said Letitia. Shh now, said David, and he ushered them out.

Beth got up for a little while after that to have dinner, but then she went back to bed. The girls came in later in their pyjamas. How much they'd already changed! Lettie, tall and rangy, Gem with her plump cheeks. Goodnight, said Beth, I love you, but no kisses, just in case. Later again, she heard the door creak open. Are you okay? he asked. Yes, she said, and he went away. She listened to the faint clink of bottle on glass and the TV coming on.

But she couldn't sleep. She had one of those scurrying little animals, whiskers twitching, chasing the scent of whoknows-what down the dark passageways of her brain. It had already brought her out in a sweat. Rogue cancer cells: she could hear them chewing. It got so overheated in there she felt her temperature rise. She threw off the covers and lay there letting her body cool. She got up and checked the living room: the TV was still on, David was asleep in his chair. She looked at him, then poured herself a half-glass of wine and crept outside.

The moon was rising over the house. She could see the girls' toys scattered on the deck and down in the yard the new cabbage seedlings they'd planted over the weekend, glowing silver-green. She sat on one of the chairs, her anxiety subsiding—or rather, transforming itself into something new. She regretted not walking with Georgia today, that would have done her good. She wasn't *that* sick. She went back inside and, with the stealth of a teenager, poured herself another wine. The dishes were done, the bench tidied, the due bills lined up in a row. David was snoring in his chair. She checked her reflection in the kitchen window and took the glass outside.

She'd said it a few times lately—and not just to herself how it can't be good being around old people like that: all day, every day, dying. It has to get to you after a while. Georgia agrees—but what can you do? A lot of them are well into their nineties. *Is that all there is?* Yeah, maybe, says Georgia, and they laugh. But then—the cycle of life!—she has her girls and goes home to them and they give her hugs and kisses and everything's all right again. Yes, things have their beginnings too. (A weak winter sun, two ladders and a plank, a can of Antique White, a couch with an old sheet thrown over—and David was on top of her. That was the beginning, wasn't it? The Saturday that gave them Letitia. Now they are *family*, with a family home full of family things. A family car in the drive. A family sticker in the back.)

There was a slight chill but no hint of a breeze. A threequarter moon was lighting the yard, the neighbouring houses, the whole suburb with its glow. Beth sipped her wine and felt a warm moon current go through her. It's funny, she thought, when you stop, stop to *think*. There was a little clock inside ticking. She looked up at the moon. There were dark spots on it. My god, she thought, you've come to take me. It was a thought so clear and yet so preposterous that she had to look around quickly to make sure no-one had heard. *The moon has come to take me away*.

Here, said the locum, a letter of referral. Take it to this address. You won't need an appointment, I've already rung through. But you need to go today. All the information is in the letter. I'll put it in an envelope—Hui? Hui took an envelope from the locum's briefcase and slid the letter inside. Her name is Dr Yi, said the locum. *Dr Yi*. Don't lose it. We can let ourselves out. This is my invoice. Do you have a car? (David had the only car; Beth went to work by train.) Then get a cab, said the locum—it's easy. But it's important you have the tests.

They left. Beth heard the front door close and a gluey silence come down. She looked at the envelope, *Dr Yi* in messy handwriting on the front and beneath that an address in Box Hill. She turned it over; it hadn't been sealed: *Please assess this 37 yr old female patient who complains of lethargy and general unwellness. Presents as possible unexplained somatic. Or more serious?* Beth folded it up, put it back and laid the envelope on the bedside table. She glanced at the invoice, looked at the ceiling, then at the clock. It had just gone ten forty-five.

She was sure it would all be a waste of time—everyone sends everyone off for tests at the drop of a hat these days but, let's face it, the day was already nearly half-over. There was no point rushing off to work now. Things would get done without her, the sky would not fall in: the residents would still be complaining, the same activities would be gone through, the same medications handed out. If it was Tuesday—was it Tuesday?—the guest musician would already be in the rec room getting her sheet music ready. The kids were at school, David was at work. The house was quiet. Sick days in the bank. Was it wrong to lie back for a while?

She put on her dressing-gown. The kitchen was clean, the dishes done, the girls' things put away. There was a note on the bench saying he'd already rung Lyn and that he would check back in with her later—could she keep her phone by the bed? Beth felt a great burden fall from her. What an odd, alien feeling it was! A whole day, to herself. She slipped her phone into her dressing-gown pocket, made some tea and toast and took it back to bed.

It certainly felt luxurious, sitting up with two pillows behind her on a late Tuesday morning while the workaday world went on outside. She'd underestimated David; he'd organised the locum, called Lyn, cleaned the kitchen, got the kids to school. He's a good dad—she's not lying when she says she didn't think he would be. People surprise you, don't they? It's easier for men, obviously—and I don't mean that in a nasty way but just in the sense that they don't have to cope with the changes to their bodies. Sure, it's a big adjustment for them, psychologically speaking, sure, I'm not saying it isn't, it must be, sure, with your wife so suddenly changed and now this new thing lying there between you, the creature you helped make. That's all true but still, thought Beth, they, the husbands, they don't have the extra fat, do they? The floppy pelvic floor, the hurt and recovery, the child on the breast, the body heaviness, the *body*-ness.

They had married in 2005 in that little church near Koonung Park. She wore white, he had a dark-blue suit. They bought the house in Heatherdale a few months later. She didn't think he was anything special at first but he did have a winning smile; she was a receptionist in a medical centre, he was the auditor who came through once every few months to have a look at the books. The year after they married she found a full-time job, training included, as a carer in a nursing home in Croydon but three years later she had Lettie—then Gem two years later again. So during that time she went down to three days a week. But she's back to five again now.

It's a nice suburb—Blossom Street especially—although you do get a bit of noise from the tollway when the wind is from the east. Sometimes it's a bit *too* quiet, to be honest. It never seems to worry David, he likes it, but when she gets home after a whole day listening to the old folk talking in a croaky whisper or not at all it's nice to have a bit of noise around. Thank god for the kids! That tornado only lasts a few hours, though—in the morning, before school, and after, before bed. When the weather's mild, like now—April, one last warm spell before it turns—she'll often take a cup of tea or a glass of wine outside to listen. Everything's distant then, far away: plates in a sink, the rumble from the tollway, a car gearing down on the Purches Street hill, a train going over the Cochrane Street bridge. But in between, up close, nothing: a soft, holy silence.

She still finds him attractive; if anything he's grown into his skin. He never looked like an accountant, really, grey suit and tie and all that. More like a tradesman, an electrician maybe, or a tiler. She wished he'd be a bit more physical, though—but what can you do? He still touches her, occasionally. She can still carry her body with confidence. True, a few kilos have lodged here and there where she'd prefer they hadn't, she is a bit plain and possibly always has been, but there's no-one alive who when backed into a corner couldn't call her face *pretty*. Plain but pretty, with a few kilos here and there.

She pushed back the doona and looked down: the nipples pushing up through the cotton pyjama top, the slightly puffy belly falling aside into generous hips, the blue undies tucked snug into the crevice of the crotch. Yes, for a thirty-sevenyear-old woman with two kids and a full-time job it was, she believed, a perfectly acceptable corpse.

The phone rang; it was him. Yes, she said, she'd seen the note. Yes, she was still in bed. No, she wouldn't think of it. The locum had sent her off for some tests. In Box Hill, she said. I'll see. Ring me, though, won't you? said David. Beth? If you need? There was real care in his voice.

She flicked through the phone for a while (she was thinking it would be nice if Georgia had rung), then got up to close the curtains. The bird was back, warbling in the tree. She touched herself, thought of David, then the locum and his horse-like face, then Hui the intern and his boyish smile. Then she thought about what might be wrong. She rolled over, stuck a pillow between her thighs, closed her eyes and slept.

When she woke the sun was bright on the curtains and the room was hot. The pillow under her head was soaked, as was the one between her thighs. She remembered how she was to go to the place on the letter of referral for some tests.

What a pain. Once you start the process, she thought-the process of finding out what's wrong-there's no telling where it will end. You have the test and they tell you you've got this and have to take that and need to stay home till you're feeling better and your whole life is thrown into chaos-or worse, they tell you the results are inconclusive or have shown nothing and you'll need to take another test, which means another morning or afternoon or whole day off, so that one minute you're walking around a free woman in complete control of your body and the next you're dependent on a bunch of names, appointment times and places you just have no control over. Don't I already have a drawer full of vitamins and supplements? Have they all been for nothing? I walk, every day, after lunch, with Georgia, three times around the park. I eat little dairy, almost no sugar, have the proper serves each day of vegetables and fruit. I see those fat people waddling down the aisles of the supermarket and I swear, not just privately but to David

too, that I will not be one of them. Nor will our kids. My fat levels are almost right for my bone structure and height.

My god, she thought, you're not even middle-aged! Sometimes when you catch the look of someone on the train you even dare to think you are still young. You've been a good wife, mother; nothing yet has come along to knock you off the straight and narrow. When you watch the news it is not to despair at the state of the world and get all upset but to congratulate yourself on living as you do where such things can never happen. You *care*, of course you care—truth be told, caring's made you what you are. But you prefer to care about the things you can change, not those remote and alien you can't. And let's not forget that what you do care about you care about deeply, maybe too deeply—in fact, you're not beyond worrying yourself sick. So if you are to be judged, and maybe you are, then let the judgment happen with this in mind.

The letter lay beside her; she reached for the phone and dialled. A young woman answered. Beth told her how she wasn't able to get in to her usual doctor so her husband had rung the locum. The locum had come and written a referral. Beth Own? said the woman. Yes, said Beth. We're expecting you, said the woman, you should be here by now.

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