

Small faults – by Alison Dyer

“Vasia and Luda” the rock declared, and she laughed. Vasia wiped the paintbrush on a knuckle of stunted blueberry branches and stuck it in his back pocket. He kissed her hard and briefly on the lips, as if underlining his signature, and pinched her left buttock. She stared at him, her dark eyelids rounded like an old mountain. “WE,” he shouted into the onshore wind, his arms stretched outward dramatically, “are here!”, and he laughed and tickled Luda. A mock scream, an outstretched tongue, and Luda slid down the slope and bolted along the trail. A trickle of falling rock across the narrow path was scuffed aside by Luda’s boots, scaring up two herring gulls.

Vasia caught up with her at the deep crevice in the rock. The suck and hiss of seawater sluicing around its echoey bottom made them stop. Luda chose a small round pebble and threw it, overhand, into the crevice. The pebble ticked, ticked, ticked its way down the walls. They strained to hear its final muted splosh.

“Over there,” Luda said, pointing to a side path braiding its way through a carpet of low shrubs. “It’s perfect.” They walked single file, awkwardly, trying to hold hands, toward the cliff.

Tao opened his small daypack and, with silently moving lips, checked its contents. Notebook, pencil, binoculars, wallet, apple. Zip. He looked down at his new hiking boots, decided not to change into a lighter pair of socks, and padded his back pants pockets. Pocket knife, gum. From the night table he picked up a brochure – a self-guided hiking tour of Signal Hill – folded it once and put it in the side pocket of the daypack, feeling for a stick of lip balm and a handful of change. A quick glance in the bathroom mirror, a tug on his sweater, and Tao left his hotel room.

“Mr. Lim,” the receptionist called out. Her young face fresh, like a saran-wrapped dish, free of time’s misgivings or stale worries. “Mr. Lim - for your dry-cleaning,” she smiled, “your receipt.” Tao, in answer, nodded. He’d noticed her the first day he’d checked in, the day before the conference. A slightly upturned nose, and matching tits pressed against her tight blouse. Tao nodded again. Maybe tonight, his last night in town, he’d ask her out for a drink. “Thank you, thank you. I pick up tonight,” he stuttered and she kept smiling. Tao stuffed the receipt in his back pocket. “My suit, I pick up tonight, yes?” “Yes.”

Outside, Tao’s face was slapped by a cool breeze. He breathed in deeply the salt on the air and felt very content. He’d enjoyed the conference. His paper, on new methodologies in DNA sampling of fossil whale bones, had been well received. He thought about the discussion that followed his presentation; the new lines of research suggested by some colleagues, and the recently announced source of government funding. Tao looked west on Duckworth Street, at the city he’d read so much about, and felt a sense of completion that he’d made it there. So different from his own home city, he thought. This jumble of colourful houses like an upturned box of children’s building blocks. But such dirty streets. Tao sighed, the thought immediately leaving his mind as he turned east toward the hill. Signal hill. He’d been looking forward to climbing it. And today, though cool, was sunny. A perfect day for hiking.

Vasia’s nose pitched to the left as he pulled on his right ear lobe. He thought her idea a little crazy. “Oh come on, scaredy-cat,” she taunted. Her chin was level with Vasia’s feet and she held on to the tips of his boots. Her own were jammed into a wedge of rock. “Come on, I want to see this hill, this city, from sea level.” Well, he thought, shrugging, why not humour her today.

Crouched on a polished knob of rock, Luda drank in the city beyond the narrow channel opening. She gulped down the fan of houses and buildings around the harbour. She scanned the ridges, wanting to swallow more. Vasia, with his back to hers, stared at the tower of rock. The sheer mass of bruised purple sandstone lurched away from the open ocean. High above him, on a warm air current, gulls practised figure eights. Vasia could feel a belch coming. He felt dizzy. He swung his arms behind him and lassoeed

