

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 lassoed

Luda. "Come here crazy woman," he said, feeling her solid warmth, her fragile form.

This time his kiss was deeper, involving her more. She responded. Her right hand traced the inner seam of his jeans. It stopped at the crook and began massaging.

He stopped at a corner store to get directions. Its door opened onto a mad junction of streets. The shop clerk stomped out her cigarette and followed him inside. Tao grabbed a bottle of spring water, placing it on the counter.

"The North Head trail, is which way please?"

"The wha?" she started. "Oh, the one 'round Signal Hill," her answer accompanied by a knowing nod suggesting she'd heard of the route but had never actually hiked it. "You wanna go down around here and out through the Battery." She motioned her head to show the direction. "You're not from around here are you." A flat statement, but not unkind. Tao threw down some change and smiled back. "Please and thank you," she said, ringing in the till.

Just past the trail head, at the narrow harbour entrance, Tao stopped. The light was dazzling, cutting up the sea and boring into his eyes. And just beyond the point, a spire of ice. The trail narrowed, necklacing the cliff. He grabbed a thick chain, clamped to the rock face, and jumped over a precipitous spot.

He heard it before he saw it. A low rumbling. A splash. This fissure - a fault in the rock splayed open by constant pressures of the sea – divided the hill in two from far below the water up to Cabot Tower at its pinnacle. Devil's Cleft, someone at the conference had called it. The trail edged toward it and around the other side. Tao stood and looked down at the water. A thick hemline of seaweed, spread like a woman's head of hair under water, waved around the rock. Above him, the crevice dipped steeply eastward. His eyes scanned the tough mats of shrubs, the hardened rivulets of quartz, the gnarls of conglomerate. It would be a climb, he thought. But with lots of footholds. And what a vantage point at the top. He'd be able to view the city, the open Atlantic and the massive iceberg.

Tao tucked his water bottle back into his daypack, tugged on his sweater, and began climbing.

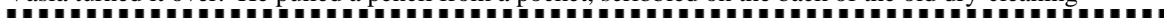
A few feet up the cliff face his left toe slipped. He grabbed a clump of exposed shrubby roots to avoid his knee cracking onto rock. A quick inhale of breath. He surveyed the cliff-face and slowly, confidently, continued climbing.

A drone from above. A growing rumble that echoed in the fissure off to his left. Tao raised his right hand to shield his eyes. A needle-prick of light pierced from the underbelly of a passing jet. The rumble turned into a jarring creak. As if on cue, the iceberg started to swivel. Tao twisted to shift his gaze.

Luda lay motionless. Her left arm was draped over the rock, the middle finger inches from the cold water. Her naked toes pointed skyward. Vasia stared at her and upended the bottle of wine he'd earlier produced from a cloth satchel. "Guess you won't want anymore Luda." He snorted a laugh.

She stirred, exhaling slowly through her mouth. Then, in one quick motion, balanced on elbows and heels, Luda zipped up her jeans. "Let's go," she said, pulling on her boots. Once again efficient, purposeful. "It's getting chilly here."

"Wait. Please, just a minute," cooed Vasia, halfheartedly looking around for something. "We should send a message," he said, leaning over and freeing a yellowed piece of paper from a nearby bush. Vasia turned it over. He pulled a pencil from a pocket, scribbled on the back of the old dry-cleaning



receipt, stuffed it into the bottle, corked it, then heaved the bottle into the ocean.

“Come Luda.” Vasia held out his hand to her. “Let’s go home.”

They stopped at a corner store at the base of the hill. Vasia needed cigarettes. The clerk was hunched over the counter, engrossed in reading a newspaper. Her finger traced the path of the words.

“Do you sell American cigarettes? Camel, ah.....” suggested Vasia. The woman pushed the paper aside reluctantly and turned to the rack, searching. Vasia waited, and glanced at the story. During his short visit over a month ago, a visiting Taiwanese academic had last been reported going for a walk on Signal Hill. Police had found no trace. No evidence. No fault assigned.

“I got one packet of Malborough,” she said. “Yeah, that’s fine,” he answered. Outside, Vasia unwrapped the plastic cover. It was swept away by a gust of wind.
