

Overboard

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Delayed at the airport more than three hours they'd drifted between chairs and the duty free shops, and given these hours of leisure Marea had used them to worry that if she put aside injury or death, the worst that could happen was that Josh and Luke wouldn't enjoy themselves and would blame her for the rest of their lives.

But on boarding, the stewards seated them efficiently, and the seats were not as uncomfortable as Marea had expected. Steaming white cloths were handed out. Listening to Abba's 1980 song 'Happy New Year', playing over the airline PA thirty years on while they waited to taxi out, Marea's anxiety that she had made a grand error of judgement taking herself and the boys to a developing Asian nation for the January holiday, eased slightly. In the check-in queue at Melbourne airport, Luke had turned to her and whispered, 'Everyone's Asian, mum.' She'd said, 'That's because we're going to Vietnam.' She had then felt a panic that a mother alone with two children might feel at embarkation, horrified with herself for choosing to be adventurous; for the responsibilities that lay ahead to please the children and keep them safe. What had she been thinking, what kind of mother was she to enact such a dumb plan? She'd never been anywhere in south east Asia herself, other than stopovers in Changi Airport.

After talking through their proposed itinerary, before she'd put the money down for the tickets, Josh had said, 'But there's a war there! The *Vietnam War*, mum.'

Marea had nodded. He was close to being right, but was actually wrong. 'That war ended thirty-five years ago. As if I'd take you if there was a war on!'

Wasn't she taking them away from the conflict, the war between their parents? What more did he want? She thought of her friend D—, who'd admired her choice, but whose very admiration had suggested risk.

This was their first holiday since the separation. Rick had gone from the family home complaining that their marriage had plateaued, with her feebly protesting that's what usually happened after fifteen years; and now here she was having the adventure of a lifetime with Luke and Josh. Rick had sent them away, paid for the trip, so that he could work full-time over the summer. She'd used up all her annual leave for this trip. Later in the year, much to Marea's surprise, worse, an anguish that would make her nauseous, Rick would be flying to the Gold Coast with his girlfriend Claire and the boys to spend buckets of money at a five star resort, on scuba-diving, power-boating, theme parks and other child-friendly activities. Marea would be saying to her friends that he'd probably paid the girlfriend's fares, and hoping he didn't kiss her in front of the boys or lie naked with her on hot nights when Josh came in overheated from a nightmare. Probably, there was air-conditioning. Probably, Josh wouldn't have a nightmare, of if he did, suffer it bravely until morning. Such worries were the aftermath of the plateau.

Marea bent her head to answer Josh over the noise of the engines: take off would be soon, the stewards were now checking that the passengers were upright and buckled in. Josh and Luke had not flown overseas before. Mostly the family had gone camping, but they had flown on a short trip to the Sunshine Coast for a package holiday and to Coffs Harbour to visit Rick's brother and the boys' cousins. Plateau-styled holidays, clearly.

Marea wiped her hands, massaging her cuticles, pushing the cloth in under her nails until the wash cloth was cold. Josh leant across her to see out the window. Luke moved unhelpfully to fill up the space Josh was trying to see out from; she would be earning every cent that the trip had cost Rick. The second worst thing that could happen was that she'd shout

at the kids, 'I wish we'd never left Melbourne!' She didn't, however, wish she were still married.

Josh was excited in his well-behaved way. Luke complained that his legs were cramped and wriggled violently, bumping his mother. They had argued about who was to sit next to mum and who next to the window; she'd taken the middle seat. Rick must have known this: that change is painful, but if you just hurtle at it, like running into the surf before summer has begun, you get used to the biting cold and before the numbness has set in you've have caught a wave and you're congratulating yourself on your vitality. He'd rushed into the surf; she'd been pushed overboard. Then, falling down through the water those first months she'd seen how bouyant the light was above as it shone down through the deep, how wondrous the brittle bubbles of air were as they soared to the surface; colourful fish had drifted on invisible currents of warmth past her. When she'd broken though to the surface again, she'd felt a nip of joy.

Long before the children were born, she had waited at the Manhattan terminal for the Stanton Island ferry. She had been with her parents, post-war refugees, survivors of the Holocaust. Amongst the great mass of people in a dark hangar without toilets, refreshments, guides or explanation, they'd shuffled forward step by step to the boat that was to take them across the water. Her father had turned to her and said with a wry smile that this was what it was like being a refugee. Her mother stared straight ahead and then corrected him. 'No, this is slower,' she'd said, sombrely pleased with her joke.

Tidying her seat pocket, Marea reminded herself that refugees did not *go to* Vietnam. Her recollection of the trip to Stanton Island was unwarranted and excessive, a sign of stress.

Marea told Luke that his friend Connor's mum, Tuyan, was born in South Vietnam and had sailed to Australia on a dangerously small boat, and that his own grandparents were once refugees.

Vietnam was also affordable, child friendly and different to anything the boys had experienced at home.

‘Will there be good shops?’ Luke asked.

‘There must be. Everywhere has shops and so some of them will be good.’

‘I want to buy games,’ he said.

‘Will there be snorkling?’ asked Josh.

It was winter where they were going, and while not particularly cold there’d be no swimming. The travel-with-kids-agent had suggested Fiji, Vanuatu, Hayman Island and Club Med Noumea as places favoured by single mothers, but Marea had never had any intention of raising resort children.

Rick had met Claire over the internet, and by discreetly installing a wall-bed in his office (the office Marea had rarely visited in recent years), their relationship had blossomed. That much Marea had pieced together. Internet dating, wall-beds, his new iPhone; all portable, mobile, rechargeable. His desires were compact and to him, in high definition. Clearly plateaued, she was of the last century, but it was the century their children had been born in.

Shepherding them ten hours later to their connecting flight, she was mother-hen. Unlike in Melbourne, they both followed her diligently. The transit was an ordeal the boys bore well. They had to go through customs and then be bussed across Ho Chi Minh airport and through more checks, to another bus, a shorter ride, a new plane. Their four star hotel in Ha Noi wasn’t an extravagance after those thirteen hours of flying.

Waking before her sons, Marea heard wind and string sounds. She left the hotel. At the park across the road, old men and women were undulating through their tai chi (or was it qigong?) exercises. Around them, on the streets that surrounded the long park, many hundreds of people were riding to work. Motor cycles, cyclos and bikes wove around each other without pause. A bike laden with racks of eggs coasted by. Before they’d left Melbourne, a friend had explained that to cross a road here, you just began walking and didn’t stop. To stop was to collide. There would never be a break in the flow of bikes and motor cycles or the

honking of horns and tinging of bells, and so Marea stepped off the crumbling curb towards the park and walked, eyes flitting between the cyclists and an old woman raising her arms in a tai chi pose, and arrived on the other side.

When Rick had complained of the plateau she had argued that children like a plateau. Family life, she'd argued, is best on a plateau with views, a light wind, and even the word 'plateau' was lovely to say with its soft French vowels. No, said Rick, I need more. She'd wept, less for herself than for Luke and Josh. They wouldn't be having the long, boring summer of childhood with both parents. There's had been a good enough marriage. Or was it true what her friend now said, that to stop was to collide?

Should she have declared herself wrong, agreed to the reforms, have got herself a Brazilian and taken the striptease class, and enthused about Rick installing a DVD player in the bedroom? Marea stopped herself: now she was caricaturing him, she was using way too many emotional exclamation marks. Or was she? Porn wasn't wrong, well not entirely; it was the conditions of production that bothered her more than the consumption, and some of the grand-daughters of these old women and men in this park could right now be indentured to sex traffickers in Sydney or Brisbane, in parlours or on film. She had wanted to say to him that the sex she wanted couldn't be easily shown on film.

She had never had a conversation with Rick like this. She did not want to be married to a man she could not have this conversation with; or one that she needed to have this conversation with. Her brain was porous, her brain was not categorical like his, and never could those rivers meet. She'd wanted to say to Rick, my parents were refugees so these are the things that come to mind, unbidden and not always wanted.

One night at a hotel in the mountains with the fog and mists swirling, Marea heard a young woman in the room next door. Her voice was high, her almost-coming-panting a trill that sounded with stops and starts for an hour. (*An hour.*) Marea wondered what she would say to the

boys if they woke. At their age she should tell them the woman was having sex. Or, if Josh asked, would she be a coward and say, that's some woman doing crazy dancing. The woman was a bit too high-pitched, but who was she to criticize?

In the mornings when the mists parted, Marea and the boys hiked through the hills, through villages centuries old, over creeks and along swine-tracks. The pigs here were small and black and the suckling sows led their young with teats hanging. In a hut an old woman laughed as she taunted her pet, a chained monkey. Sticks of uncut incense, meters long, dried on cane pallets in the weak sun.

After the twins were out of nappies there were discussions between Rick and Marea as to whether they should have another child. Was it when they first plateaued that they both decided yes? Rick urged her to. He was soon to be promoted. They could afford help this time. A few months passed; then a pregnancy, a miscarriage. No, she said to Rick, we have two healthy boys. That's plenty. We have everything we need.

Other women pitied Marea her two sons. 'Are you trying for a girl?' she was asked when the boys were young. Now, in this other country Marea, is congratulated. Her fortunes are great, no matter that she has no husband, she has accomplished sons. 'How old are your be-be's?' she is asked each day. She's told that the eldest has the seniority; no matter that Josh was first by only ten minutes. The boys smile, shrug and scowl. Luke, with his almost blond hair, is often the favourite. Marea teases them by explaining that here in Vietnam the young care for their elders. 'Everyone thinks I'm very lucky to have not one, but two sons to do this.' Two old women in black boaters and with their teeth painted black, stroke the boys' faces laughing with pleasure. She tells Luke and Josh that the reason they see so few old men is because so many died as young soldiers and civilians, during the war.

They ride bicycles from a sleeping volcano down through villages and past rice paddies and across slow-moving brown rivers. They buy sticks of sugar cane split in half by a crouched woman wielding a large

blade. The sugar cane is green and moist and they chew it while riding. Luke wobbles and falls off into the weeds and gets up laughing with the cane sticking jauntily out of his mouth. Elsewhere, they take a boat to floating villages where fish is farmed in sunken cages. More exclamations as to Marea's good fortune.

They pass through towns in which the air is grey. Their guide for the day explains these are coal-mining towns. Women squat before mounds of coal three metres high, pounding the mountain into cakes the size of bricks. Children bicycle to school through the blackened, bleak air. The guide tells Marea that cancers are very frequent here. Marea vows to write to Rio Tinto and BHP to demand that they put pressure on the national mining company here, but later forgets to do this. The boys are not listening. Luke has his iPod plugged in, Josh his Nintendo. Near a nine hundred year old village, they walk past a school where the impeccably uniformed children are playing outside. Some boys wave at Josh and Luke, who hesitate and then ask with a look, can they? — and run towards the boys playing soccer. Marea sits down gratefully, turns her face to the sun and thinks of the young woman's trilling pleasure, imagining someone's hands — whose? — slipping along her own thighs, between her legs. After some time she opens her eyes, watches the boys. Luke and Josh will remember this game forever.

The wall-bed: about one or two years earlier a couple of brochures had arrived in the mail about wall-beds and she'd asked Rick, 'Do we need a wall-bed?' But what had Rick replied? She couldn't remember. Had she been looking at him when they spoke? His neck may have flushed, or he may have turned his back. He would have changed the subject. One night she had used the key to his office and had seen the wall-bed for herself. Well, she'd seen the locked cupboard that housed it with its pert key hole. Had his girlfriend Claire bought the sheets? After that, she'd returned home and wept. Then she'd rung D—, who comforted her by sharing her shock.

Not once did Luke or Josh say they wished Dad was here with them. Where did they learn such restraint, such consideration? Marea wondered if they talked about the divorce when she was out of earshot. They were twins who talked.

Some nights when he was wakeful and keeping Rory awake with his talk, Josh came into her hotel bed. She was lucky, yes she was. She'd lie her hand on his hip as if to say, You are here, on firm ground, I know you. Then he'd settle and fall quickly asleep.