

Five Thousand Feet Beneath Utopia

A story by Sam Sharkey



Prelude

In the not too distant future, there is no homelessness. There is no government. There is no war. Humanity finally prospers as a well-oiled, efficient machine. Everyone knows and plays their well-defined roles to the most scrupulous of degrees. All affairs, be they political, social or economic, are handled with just and methodical care by SHIPPR, the Execulon (a corporation-state for those unfamiliar). We have reached utopia. Not the facile, doddering utopias of Plato or Marx or Bacon, but a true, pragmatically achieved, perfectly calculated utopia. The utopia is not classless. It was never going to be. To believe otherwise is below even the most naive of childish ideation.

Blessed be the elevants living in consumeristic hedonism in The Spire, the beautiful garden city above the clouds. Elevants need not work. Elevants need not worry. Automation has rendered all toil in The Spire obsolete. As previously stated, the utopia is not classless, and elevants would not be able to indulge in this rapturous existence without the valued labour of the streetstockers that lie five thousand feet below. The majority of the human workforce of today earns a living through the delivery of consumable goods to elevant customers. Colloquially, these dear cogs in our well-oiled machine are known as 'munch runners'. Do not feel sorry for them, as I am beginning to fear you are, my dear reader, for munch runners no longer have to deal with many of humanity's most grievous ills. All munch runners own their own home, and nearly all go to bed with a full belly in the evening. If that were not generous enough – and believe me, my dear reader, it certainly is! – These decidedly unbeleaguered couriers of ours are offered a window of opportunity. If there is a munch runner who carries out their work with the highest level of efficiency and customer satisfaction – no less than a four-point-nine-star average over a period of two hundred fifty thousand orders will suffice – they shall be afforded a place in The Spire,

gaining status as an elevant and living out the rest of their life in blissful, hard-earned liberty.

Only two munch runners have ever made this most honourable transition, but a third is drawing ever closer.

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It had been a long day for Simone Riccardi. They were all long days for Simone, really. But as this long day draws to its merciful end, so too soon would all long days. The dam wall was about to burst. Simone had done the same maddening calculations every evening for the last two years, obsessively tracking numbers and collating data. If her calculations were correct – and they most certainly were – one more week of perfect orders and Simone would elevate. Forty-five orders a day on average. Seven days a week. Two hundred and forty-nine thousand six hundred and eighty-five orders delivered at an average customer service rating of four point nine one stars. Three hundred and fifteen perfect orders to go. Seven days of her best work. No one had elevated in forty-plus years. But she was going to. A perfect life for her and Claude. This unyielding, quarter-of-a-century-long tenure as a munch runner would finally be over. And Simone would be happy forever. Free from worry. Free from toil.

In the fading twilight of the crisp late autumn evening, Simone shot her leafy surroundings a cursory glance. Soon to be home. No more heading down the highway to a cold shower and an often un-electrified house. Simone vowed that once she lived here, she would never make the journey back to the Inner Rim ever again.

“Just two more weeks,” she muttered to herself over the hum of her engine.

“Just two more weeks...”

Simone flicked the indicator on her moped downward to alert potential reckless drivers sharing the road of her intention to perform a right-hand turn and head back towards the rim. She had

heard far too many grisly tales of vehicle accidents involving runners to adopt a lackadaisical approach towards road safety. Not that appropriate vehicle indication would do too much good if a meth head in a semitrailer decided to plough into her. Still, peace of mind is nine-tenths of total security, as the saying goes.

Simone had just begun fantasising about spending her days strolling through the decadent gardens of The Spire at a leisurely pace, hand in hand with Claude, when a sickening thud and subsequent bestial yelp wrenched her from placating visions of a perfect life as an elevant. A flash of fuzzy, opaque grey collided with a hurtling white shadow only about twelve feet directly in front of Simone's front wheel. The white shadow let out a screech that bade the hairs on the back of Simone's neck stand erect, and the nauseating scent of burnt rubber filled the air. The white shadow, which Simone had now registered as a minivan, promptly raced off into the darkness, leaving a fuzzy, mutilated shape in its wake on the bitumen. Simone flicked on her high beams, slid off her helmet and rolled over towards the jerking grey mass. She let out a tremulous gasp that strangled itself somewhere in the middle of her throat. It was a kangaroo. The Spire used to be home to a flourishing population of roos, but when some clever boffins realised they could create kangaroo meat synthetically, almost all the population was systematically extinguished by hunters and poachers. This was only the second or third time in Simone's life that she had even seen one. And now here it was. Twitching and bleeding plain as the day. The moribund marsupial that lay spasmodically jerking in front of Simone filled her with an uncontrollable wave of despair and sorrow. What a sad, undignified end for a truly remarkable creature. Simone felt hot tears begin to well up at the injustice of it all, and her nose stung as she ardently fought their escape from her eyes. The bastard hadn't even stopped driving. He could have hit her instead.

“Stupid fuck!” Simone bellowed into the empty, starless night, spurred into action by the realisation that there had indeed been a person operating the vehicle that struck the now-motionless roo. After standing there fuming and cursing for what might have been several long minutes, Simone’s attention was drawn by a stirring from the corpse. She raced over, joy leaping skyward inside her heart – the roo was alive! Simone skidded to a halt in front of the newly reanimated creature, panting. Her heart fell back down to rest somewhere behind her navel. The neck of the poor thing was twisting off at completely the wrong angle, and one of its legs was hanging on only by a few sinews. A deep, scarlet pool was now expanding in all directions from the disfigured shape. Yet it was indeed squirming and convulsing with life around the middle. Then a small, dark being burst forth from the limp roo and scurried over towards Simone’s bike. She could make out the silhouette of a joey in the light of the high beams. The defenceless little creature swung its head back towards Simone and stood there for a moment. Although it was dark, something in Simone’s heart told her that there was definite, fleeting eye contact between woman and beast. And then, rather unceremoniously, the joey bounced out of the light and was engulfed by darkness and scrub.

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There was a moth fluttering about the room. Simone could hear it flapping dusty wings and throwing itself repeatedly into the walls. The infuriating noise was pulling Simone slowly but surely away from what had been a rather rejuvenating sleep. Simone hated moths. Always had. The sound of a crackling fire and the smell of overboiling coffee pushed Simone from the edge of slumber into an irritating degree of wakeful proprioceptive awareness. Her tongue was heavy and dry in her mouth.

“Claude! You’re burning it, dipshit.” She groaned.

“Good morning to you too.” Replied a nasal tenor. Claude’s rake-like frame swam into being before Simone’s sleet-impeded eyes.

“Where’s the moth?” Simone rubbed her eyes and began suspiciously scanning the uppermost corners of the room.

“What moth? Jeez, they really get under your skin, huh?”

“What time is it?” Simone grumbled after a pause, satisfied that the moth had either left the room or had been a figment of her imagination.

“Just gone quarter to eight,” Claude replied, slumping down next to Simone.

“Fuck!” Simone started upwards and began fighting a losing battle with her pants.

“I’ve missed the breakfast rush!”

“Ohhh, come off it, Sim,” Claude huffed, slumping his shoulders.

“We won’t have to do this bullshit for much longer, anyway. You’re what, a week, give or take, off elevating now? You can afford one last day off. God knows you need it.” Claude’s hands began to softly caress the small of Simone’s back.

“You need to get to work too, you lazy prick; electricity comes out of your end, and I’m sick of no TV after six.” Simone smiled sardonically at Claude. Claude sighed softly and gave no reply. Simone let silence hang for a moment, buttoning up her shirt. She saw no reason she should have to mollify Claude when he was about to elevate by proxy through her.

“Just because we will be out of here, knock on wood...” – Simone rapped her fist against the headboard – “...In a week doesn't mean you don’t still have to get out there on your bike just like me. If anything, you should be working extra hard as a gesture of love and respect for the fact that you have been lucky enough to latch onto a soon-to-be elevant.”

Claude threw his head back, long black locks dangling over his shoulders, and let out a half-sincere, half-derisive laugh.

“What’s so good about being an elephant anyways? Apart from the obvious material excess. Pompous wankers for the most part. When I’m up there, I’ll still come down to the rim every day and hang out with my people, and so should...” Claude halted his all-too-often-shared tirade abruptly, catching Simone’s withering glare.

“Not that I’m not eternally grateful to be with you, though.” Claude spoke, all humorous notes deserting his voice.

“I know I pretty much owe my life to how hardworking and resilient you are.”

A silence hung for a moment, and Claude resumed gently massaging his hands over the softer parts of Simone’s lower back and hips.

“My advice would be not to forget your fortune.” Simone said in a cool voice, pulling away from Claude’s warm touch.

“And wake me up earlier next time – then maybe I’ll make the breakfast rush, and maybe you’ll get a root out of it.” Simone turned on her heel and flounced out the door, leaving Claude in solitude, amplified by the cold darkness of the morning. The moth that had been hiding behind the coolbox for the duration of the discussion reappeared and resumed its asinine act of shambling dimly about the room. Claude chuckled softly.

“She don’t miss a trick, that girl. You best be gone by the time she gets back though.”

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It was a pretty normal morning in the grim old rim, Claude thought. Mucky children with tattered shoes and broken backpacks hurrying to school. Check. Newly appointed adolescent munch-runners doing wheelies down the main drag on still-shiny bikes. Check. Mangy dogs

marking their favourite walls. Check. Dishevelled junkies sitting on crackhouse doorsteps feebly accosting passers-by for spare credits or cigarettes. Check. It generally got rougher in the rim the closer one got to The Spire. The rim did have its more “affluent” parts after all, like where he and Simone lived. However, here 'affluent' only meant owning a TV, your delivery bike not being under SHIPPR lease, and enjoying functioning electricity at least half the time. As normal as the morning initially seemed, Claude was barely ten minutes into his skyward commute when he noticed the first abnormal thing of the day. A large crowd was gathered at the first turnpike towards The Spire. It was common courtesy amongst streetstockers not to loiter around the turnpike so as not to cause a jam. A disgruntled hum was emanating from the clearly not-too-pleased mob. Claude pulled over into the service lane and scanned the mass for a face he could recognise, sounds of frustration and disillusionment now growing louder from the midst of the gathering.

“Theo!” Claude called, beckoning forth the hulking, stocky frame of his friend with wildly gesticulating hands. Theo whipped around and shot Claude a wide, toothy grimace, shaking his bulbous head of wiry jet-black hair in an over-zealous display of disappointment.

“What’s all this then?” Claude asked, unsuccessfully trying to disguise the notes of panic in his voice as concerned curiosity.

"Fuckin' dogs, that's what," Theo spat, thrusting outward a crumpled pamphlet in his meaty hand.

“Some cleanshirt was handing out these flyers, but he left pretty quickly.”

Claude took the paper and began to read aloud.

“OFFICIAL EXECULONIC DECREE No. 213a: SHIPPR UNVEILS SPOT (SHIPPR PROMPT ORDER TRANSPORTER)”

SPOT is an autonomous delivery robot that collects orders from a restaurant's front door and brings them to customers with unchallenged expediency and efficiency." A small illustration of a cutesy automaton with an artificial smile plastered over its cold machine face gazed menacingly up at the two angry men. Claude furrowed his brow and continued reading.

"Active from the dinner rush on May twenty-fifth in Spire Central, SPOT is small enough to fit through a doorway but large enough to hold up to six pizza boxes! This new leap forward in automation – in tandem with our highly valued human couriers – will provide customers with quicker goods at lower costs and will match deliveries with appropriate modalities. From the breakfast rush on May twenty-seventh, all rush-hour deliveries (seven to eight in the morning, twelve to one in the afternoon, and seven to eight in the evening) will be carried out by SPOT. SPOT will not be active outside of rush hours, and this change is likely to have little impact on the livelihoods of current human couriers. Any infringement on behalf of a current SHIPPR employee in regard to what has been expressed previously within this decree will result in severe ratings penalties and further disciplinary action, including but not limited to... Blah blah blah."

"Little impact, my ass," Claude scoffed.

"Rush hours are where we make all our money." Theo spat from between gritted teeth.

"Guess they musta known we'd all hate it. They didn't even give us a day's notice before rolling them out, the pricks."

"They're taking the absolute fucking piss." Claude nodded in vehement agreement.

"Well, not that it's gonna matter much to you soon anyway." Theo replied, unmistakable pangs of envy and anger littering his voice. Claude, caught off guard by this affront, let out a huffy, indignant noise and furrowed his brow.

“You know I’m not gonna stand for this shit regardless of where I’ll be in a week’s time! What a bullshit thing to say.” Claude glared at Theo. A foreboding silence hung between the two men.

"Tonight," Theo growled. Every crevice of his leathery, weatherbeaten face was creased with white-hot fury.

"Tonight, six-thirty, the start of the dinner rush at Spire Central. We make a statement. There won’t be any trouble rallying troops. You in?"

“Fucking oath I am.”

“Good.” Theo slapped Claude a little too hard on the back for it to feel friendly and hurried off towards his bike, leaving Claude fuming in his wake.

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The cool breeze of the evening and an unusually productive day at work had done little to quell Claude’s anger. Bastards. Claude had a feeling they must know Simone was getting close. Pricks. They must not like it. No more after her, that’s for sure. Assholes. I guess three in seventy years is more than enough to make you want to pull the ladder up after yourself for good. Fucking dogs. Cunts. Claude checked his watch. Quarter past. Instead of turning down the turnpike and heading home, Claude changed course, turning left and heading for the city centre. Soon enough, he could hear the grumble of a disgruntled crowd and make out a gathering of headlights in the distance. Claude pulled over his bike and rushed to greet the mob, many of whom he could now recognise under the glowing light of the Spire Central clocktower. Passing evelants were eyeing the growing crowd of munch runners with looks ranging from fear to deep suspicion. Many runners, noticing this, began to pull surgical masks over their faces. Claude followed suit. Three

minutes to half past. They were on the most heavily populated street in all of The Spire. Claude agitatedly shifted his weight from foot to foot, beginning to sweat with anticipation.

“Wasn’t sure you’d show.” Claude recognised the deep drawl as Theo’s and spun around quickly.

“You thought I’d just play ball with this bullshit?” Claude said.

“I thought you were a Harlem Globetrotter, but you’ve pleasantly surprised me,” Theo replied.

Claude sniggered and was just about to formulate a clever reply when there was a sharp

“THERE THEY ARE!”

Two dozen rotund, matte-black automatons, about four feet tall and two feet wide, screens emblazoned with smiley emoticons on their fronts, were wheeling down the strand, some peeling off into restaurants, others weaving in between pedestrians on the footpath. They were all carrying paper bags, packages and bottles that disappeared neatly into dark internal compartments. Some of the elephant children giggled and swooned at the smiling food delivery robots. There was a long moment of motionlessness amongst the crowd. All this angst over these kitschy hamburger-carrying robots for a brief moment became very trivial. They were actually there, the little things. They were quite disarming really. Cute almost. Like small children or pets. And then someone roared

“Fucking rush them!”

The sudden outburst spurred the crowd into frenetic action. The calm chatter of the evening was suddenly replaced with atrocious cries and curses. Bricks began to fly. Windows began to shatter. Storefronts were collapsing inward. An alarm began to ring. The smell of smoke and petrol fumes choked the fresh evening air. Elephants were scattering, their faces contorted into masks of panic, mouths agape in screams nobody could hear. A wheel flung from one of the SPOTs crashed down upon the head of a fleeing elderly man carrying a schooner of upmarket stout,

snapping his neck and putting a violent end to his drunken attempt at escape. Claude, seeing this, was struck between two awful urges, unsure whether to laugh or vomit. A fire was roaring somewhere. A child began to cry somewhere else. The busiest street in the entire Spire had degenerated into a pantomime of unbridled chaos, and decades of bottled-up fury and resentment began to rain down on any SPOT unlucky enough to be caught stranded on the warpath. Claude snatched a barstool from the nearest patio and swung it down with all its force onto the top of a SPOT. The smiling emoticon smeared across its cold metallic face shattered into a terrible sneer, and a compartment burst open, showering Claude with grape soda and pork ramen. Claude kicked over the malfunctioning, noodle-spattered android and began to wail on it with the patio chair, berating it for sullyng his work clothes. Claude's chest leapt in excitement. Oh, what a rush this was. He felt like for the first time in all his life he had power, dominion over something. This stupid little machine was his bitch. What right did it have to a man's work? He was going to dominate it. Covet it. Take its decrepit remains home as a souvenir to show Simone as proof of conquest. It was a feeling that harkened back to something prehistoric. Something that had stirred amongst the primordial soup for aeons. A rupture in the natural order. A new, righteous backside usurping the throne. Claude felt it in all its violent, joyous glory momentarily, but that exquisite feeling deserted him as quickly as it arrived and was replaced by a searing pain in his right buttock. Bullets had begun to rain down on the crowd. The peacekeepers had arrived. The riotous crowd was now being dispersed and systematically mown down by ravenous gunfire from dozens of assailants in grey armour inscribed with white SHIPPR logos. The strand was transformed into a river of takeaway food, paper bags, broken glass, circuit boards, bikes, blood and bodies. Claude was jolted forward with the impact of the shot and, by dumb luck, was thrown straight into an abandoned idling moped with the keys still in the ignition. Taking this,

along with the fact he had been shot in the ass, as a message from God that the party was over and it was time to leave, Claude rolled back the accelerator and jolted away from the bedlam, adroitly manoeuvring the bike around a lunging peacekeeper and fleeing Spire Central like a bat out of hell, without even casting the swiftest of glances over his shoulder at the carnage that lay behind.

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Simone was in a good mood. Another day of perfect orders, and a busy one at that. Fifty-five orders. Ten better than average. Even the morning news concerning the introduction of SPOTs had done little to dampen her temperament. They would be bringing her shit soon. Simone generally tried to avoid Spire Central at rush hour anyway. A good place for business, fair enough, but an even better place to cop a bad rating due to the volume of orders coming through. The trick, Simone discovered, was to always stay about two kays off central, as that was when the order allocation system would ping you for pickups there that you were unable to refuse. Once an order had pinged to you, it was your order. For munch runners, there was no option to cancel. The only thing really weighing on Simone's mind was the cold encounter she and Claude had shared that morning. He always meant well, Claude. And she did rub it into him a fair bit that he was elevating through her. He could be impulsive, stupid and lazy, sure, but he was nowhere near the worst she could have done and, for the most part, was a loving and appreciative partner. Honestly, he was a harder worker than sixty-odd per cent of the runners out there, Simone thought. A lot of them, older ones who had given up all hope of a life beyond mere existence especially, just used the job to get a free feed. Smart, really. Between zero and one was the third most common rating a runner had, after three to four and four to four-point-eight.

Pulling up onto the sidewalk next to home, Simone had her interest piqued by something unusual. The moped that was in the spot Claude usually parked was not his. And something more: the backseat and brake light appeared to be spattered and stained with a dark blemish. Simone reached out and wiped the seat with her sleeve, and upon inspecting her forearm under the yellow glow of the streetlamp, she was rocked by a nauseating realisation. Blood. The seat of the moped was positively drenched in it. Whoever had been riding it must have been in a real bad way. Simone felt her stomach turn over. Claude. What if their cold, unfriendly interaction that morning had been their last?

“Perish the thought.” Simone gasped to herself, head spinning and rushing towards her doorstep. Bursting through the threshold, she called repeatedly for Claude, her voice rising in agitation with each repetition, yet no response was forthcoming. Simone fumbled around for the lightswitch. It was pitch black in there. After several agonising seconds grasping blindly at the walls, Simone found her target. She flicked downward. Nothing.

“For fucks sake!” Simone wailed, slamming her fist against the wall. Then a strangled groan feebly announced Claude’s presence from the other side of the room.

“Sim...”

“Claude! Claude, oh my god. What happened, baby?” Simone started forward.

“Stay there for a sec; it’s dark... you could step on me. I’m on the floor.” The disembodied groan was just above a whisper. There was a rustling somewhere, and then a match was struck.

“Make a fire.”

Simone could just make out Claude’s eyes underneath the bloodstained hand that held the match. Even in the darkness Simone could see the irrepressible agony and fear with which they were full. Taking the matchbox, Simone silently followed Claude’s instruction, and within five

minutes the room was visible and a fire was crackling. A dark crimson smear wove itself ominously to the furthest corner of the room from Simone. Claude was indeed in a terrible way. His sweat-soaked face was screwed up in a pale mask of excruciation, and he was slumped awkwardly on his left side, head resting against the coolbox. His position bore an uncanny resemblance to a marionette with its strings cut.

“Water... Water, please.” Claude managed to get out.

Simone rushed to the sink and brought back a full glass. Claude drank like it very well could be the last time he did so, a good portion of the water ending up spilt down his front.

“I got shot in the ass.” Claude let out a rattling chuckle that got nowhere near his petrified eyes.

“We need to get you to a hospital immediately. I’m going to help you up and then –”

“No. I can’t go to a hospital; they are all under surveillance. I’ll never get out.”

“What the fuck have you done?”

"Sim, please. Just listen. There was a riot in central. Peacekeepers: those bots delivering food. Taking our jobs. How fucked is that? Everyone barely clings on to life down here as is. Imagine how bad it will be in a few months. I couldn't just do nothing. They killed... They killed Theo – well, I think they did, at least. They killed heaps of us. Probably a lot of people we know. So many bodies. I was lucky enough to escape. No one saw my face, I promise you. There's a first aid kit in the bathroom. Painkillers and bandages. Patch me up with that. I'll be okay. I just need to lay low for a couple of days or weeks while it blows over. Maybe see if you can get some kids to jack me a medi-bot or something." There were tears now spilling out of Claude's wild eyes, and he let out a hair-raising wail accompanied by a spasmodic, impossibly contorting writhe of agony.

"God, it hurts so fucking much," he sobbed.

"Why did you join them, Claude, you fucking idiot? You'll be out of here soon. You didn't need to make it your problem." Tears – more a byproduct of frustration than sorrow – were now beginning to well in Simone's eyes too.

"It might've escaped your attention, but I've been shot in the fucking ass! Spare me the lecture for once, okay? I know I fucked up. I know, I know... Just please... we have bandages and endone in the bathroom cupboard... I'm really hurting here, Sim... Please."

"Oh my god, baby." Simone sobbed, swooping down on Claude and smothering his sweaty face with kisses.

"I love you so much, Claudie. I'm really sorry. I can't believe I called you a fucking idiot after you've been shot. What was I thinking? Oh you poor thing."

"Sim... Please... in the bathroom cabinet."

"Yes, of course, baby."

Simone returned half a minute later with alcohol wipes, bandages and a bottle of painkillers.

"Let me roll you over, babe."

"Pills first... please."

Simone paused. Claude hadn't the best track record with pills, and sobriety was a relatively new achievement for him.

"Sim, look at me." Claude's eyes, though tears were no longer falling from them, were still as filled with dread as ever.

"I'm scared, Sim. Please just do as I ask."

Simone relaxed her grip on the bottle and outstretched her hand, palm upwards towards Claude.

Claude raised his bloody fingers, taking the bottle, and shoved no fewer than five pills behind his trembling, saliva-caked lips.

“That’s heaps, Claude! You could OD!”

“I just don’t wanna be awake anymore. I’m so tired. I need to sleep. To be free from this pain.

I’ll be fine in a bit. Just help me roll over.”

Simone assisted Claude into a prone position and began to pull down his blood-soaked trousers.

After the agonising process of cleaning the wound and bandaging him up, Simone was

thoroughly exhausted. Claude had begun to let out harshly rattling snores. The endone was

clearly doing its job. Simone curled up next to her wounded lover and rested her head on his

erratically rising and falling chest. She was overcome with an overwhelming sense of devotion

towards Claude she hadn’t felt in quite some time. They had been together, had seen each other

every day now for close to fifteen years. He wasn’t going to die, Simone told herself. He

couldn’t just leave her like that. After getting shot in the ass too. What a shitty way to go. Ha ha.

Simone could feel his heart dully thudding against her ear. Such a beautiful, affirming sound it

was. Soft and steady. Rhythmic proof of life. She was determined not to let it stop, telling herself

silently she would lie awake all night, listening, keeping watchful vigil.

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There was a fluttering somewhere. A beating of wings. Simone was seated on the best bench of

her favourite spire park, Claude by her side, his long arm around her shoulders. You could see a

river from where they were sitting. It was alive with fish and ducks and insects throughout spring

and summer. The sun filled the distance between the sides of the banks perfectly when it was

setting, like a colossal orange disappearing into a golden sleeve. It was truly a beautiful place.

Birds called lazily into the warm evening air.

“I want to go home, Sim.”

"Please, Claude, can't we stay a little longer? The sun sets in like five minutes. Right behind the river. I want you to see.”

“I'm dying here, Sim. Let me out. I want to fly into the sun.”

Simone felt the ground beneath her feet shift. The park began to darken and dissolve, the bench peeling suddenly away from underneath her backside. There was definitely something fluttering somewhere. Dusty and disgusting.

“Simone.”

Claude was melting. Decomposing and contorting, flesh was rotting and peeling away from his horrible insectoid face. A giant fleshy proboscis was arising from its midst. Claude shrieked and howled inhuman cries as hideous wings burst from beneath the flesh of his back, hurling his mangled body skyward, and showering Simone with gristle and gore as they began to beat... beat... beat...

Simone woke with a start, beads of cold sweat racing down her back. Judging by the amount of light in the room, dawn had just broken. She swivelled her head around to face Claude, who Simone was most thankful to find still breathing and very much not a monstrous insect man. She sat there paralysed for a moment, then something soft brushed against her cheek, fluttering as it went. Simone felt her skin attempt to peel away from her body.

“The fucking moth!”

Simone flailed her arms wildly; she could hear it flapping around the room. Oh, how that sound was like a white-hot iron raking against her insides. Leaping upward from Claude, she threw

herself frenetically around the room in search of the little lamp-loving bastard. But alas, after more than five minutes of ropeable searching, it again proved to have eluded her. Simone glanced over her shoulder at Claude. Not a corpse just yet. Still breathing. Still sleeping. Still shot and bedridden and probably not going to live longer than a couple of days without medical attention. Oh, how horrible it all was. She couldn't stay in this god-forsaken room any longer with moribund old Claude and that taunting, malevolent, demented, fucking moth! Simone could feel the room slowly closing in around her, suffocating her and sapping all her will to do anything at all. She needed to just go out and deliver. Get out of here. Another day of perfect orders. That was exactly what she needed. The sooner she could elevate, the sooner she could help Claude. The longer they stayed down here, the slimmer Claude's chances at survival became. But she couldn't just leave him here to rot, could she? Maybe she should stay and care for him. Try to nurse him back to something that resembled health. He likely wouldn't be able to eat or wash or go to the bathroom without her assistance anyway. What if she left to work and came home this evening to find him already dead? Simone paused, feverishly reviewing her options. What had he suggested again? Bribe a few kids to jack a medi-bot from a hospital? Pure lunacy, really. Even if the kids Simone was supposed to bribe pulled it off, they stood to gain a lot more by stripping the bot and selling its parts than returning the bot to her. Altruism was at best an unrewarded and at worst a dangerous commodity to have in the rim. Claude's only real chance at survival was either through a rim hospital and a subsequent indefinite period of incarceration or through hanging on until they were elevated. Why didn't she just drop him off at the hospital? They could patch him up, and maybe he could think of some clever alibi to get out of there without arousing too much suspicion? Fat chance, Simone thought. A munch runner turning up with a gunshot wound a day after a riot where heaps of them were shot. Hmmm, I

wonder what happened. It wouldn't matter how credible the bullshit Claude would try to spin was. Simone would never see him again if he were brought to the hospital. She was sure of it. They could get him fixed a lot easier up there, Simone thought. Elevants did not have to answer for injuries in the same way that streetstockers did. Could be a hunting incident. Elevants did love their blood sport after all. They saw a kangaroo, and she accidentally shot him in the asscheek. Silly woman. Very plausible, Simone thought. One too many munch runners feigning vehicle incidents to get a payout (one) had made it so that every serious injury coming through the rim hospitals was documented and scrutinised to the most meticulous of degrees. Of course the cheap bastards almost never paid out for legitimate vehicle accidents anyway. An image of a blood-spattered Claude being interrogated and beaten by peacemakers flashed terribly through Simone's head. The rumination period had been brought to a close. Simone's mind was made. She would simply have to go out there and do her job, leaving Claude with ample food and water, pain medication, a bucket, and toilet paper all within arm's reach. Clenching her fists, Simone promised herself inwardly to do even better than yesterday. If she had a really good day, she could just about get to two or three days of perfect orders left. She double-checked her customer satisfaction statistics on her phone. Two hundred and forty-nine thousand seven hundred and forty orders at a four-point-nine-one-star average. Two hundred and sixty perfect orders left to complete. Simone's best-ever number achieved in a single day was one hundred and three. Three days in that ballpark and she would be there. It would indeed be a herculean effort. There had, after all, also been days that brought with them pathetic numbers like eight and eleven. It all depended on how hungry the elevants were over the next couple of days. "Three days or less." Simone whispered to herself, verbalising this most ambitious goal in hopes that words would manifest it into actuality.

Could Claude even hang on that long without a doctor? Simone shot him a quick glance, unable to help herself. She had been trying not to look since she woke. Still breathing. He actually looked a little better than the evening before, Simone tried to convince herself. More colour perhaps. Simone started towards a pile of clothes and began to dress herself at a frenetic pace. She would go out today. Oh yes, she would. Bend over backwards for those pricks up there as per usual. Nothing could, nothing would, stand in her way.

*

It was a dark, miserable morning. Winter had struck with a cruel, freezing blow, and munch runners who had not partaken in the debauchurous activities of the previous evening were unenthusiastically mounting bikes like the burdens of beasts they were, slouching towards Bethlehem, preparing themselves sullenly for another day occupied by the alienating futility of menial, transient labour. Normally these gloomy conditions bode as a good omen for runners – grim weather meant fewer people going outside to purchase goods and a higher volume of orders to be collected and delivered, pinging away all across The Spire; however, on this particularly dismal, frigid late-May morning, the atmosphere was thick with a most uneasy malaise. News of last night’s calamity had been disseminated swiftly amongst the populace, and the presence of a multitude of armed peacekeepers had not gone unnoticed upon arrival at the turnpike. Garrulous neon billboards above the turnpike were flashing

“MAJOR INCIDENT AT SPIRE CENTRAL EVE OF MAY 25th.”

“CONFIRMED CASUALTIES: 27 SHIPPR EMPLOYEES, 2 ELEVANTS, 3 UNIDENTIFIED.”

“SUSPECTED OFFENDERS WILL BE HARSHLY PROSECUTED.”

An amplified voice began to blare out in a foreboding, colossal baritone

“All commuters will be required to submit to identification protocol upon arrival at the turnpike. All commuters are subject to possible detention and cross-examination.”

A listless milling of feet and rolling of wheels began to form stricken queues. There was no chatter or greetings ringing out from the linear mass. The lack of conversation was jarring considering the sheer number of workers now lining up. A discordant orchestra consisting of the idling of motors and the vigorous lashing of the downpour against buildings and pavement droned on in a dreadful dirge that struck fear into the hearts of the now rain-soaked crowd. After a quarter of an hour that felt like millennia, Simone was facing a monstrous machine gun-wielding peacekeeper who must have stood close to seven feet tall. She peered up into the droplet-spangled black visor, which in turn tilted downward to face her. Simone quickly scrutinised her reflected face, trying silently to extinguish any lines of anxiety and guilt tainting her expression.

“Face the screen for identification.” The behemoth thrust forth a giant hand holding a small tablet up to Simone’s face. The screen flashed, and the peacekeeper swiftly withdrew his hand.

“Simone Riccardi.” A cold, masculine voice rang out in the grating elegant accent, rolling and inflecting in all the wrong places

“Yes.”

“You share a residence with Claude Magellan.”

Simone felt her stomach lurch violently.

“Yes.” It took every fibre of Simone’s being to maintain the neutrality of her tone.

“Are you aware Claude is an anti-SHIPPR agitator suspected to have engaged in the heinous act of insurrection that took place yesterday evening?”

“No. This is news to me.” Simone did not break eye contact with her own eyes reflected in the peacekeeper's visor.

“Then you can account for his whereabouts from half six to half seven yesterday?”

“He was with me all evening.” Simone replied flatly.

Simone had most effectively composed herself now. Her cool exterior could not be penetrated. She wasn't going to give up anything to this prying overgrown prick.

“We have reason to believe otherwise.” Simone could tell the peacekeeper was wearing an ugly sneer underneath his visor.

“We have reason to believe that Claude partook in the riot last night and was responsible for the destruction of SHIPPR property.” The peacekeeper continued, voice saturated in a most accusatory flavour of venom.

"Look, I don't know what else to tell ya. Claude was with me all evening yesterday. And why would he go to that stupid riot anyway? He's about to elevate with me. You've got my numbers down there on your little thing, don't you? I'm about to go up. Would be a pretty counterproductive thing to do on his part if you ask me. If you had anything legit on him, then you'd already have snapped him up. Seems to me that you're just out here fishing.” Simone didn't have to feign any of the righteous frustration that was now creeping into her tone. Stupid Claude. As if he let himself get sucked in like that.

“Where is he today then? He has yet to be identified this morning.”

“I don't know, either home or further back in the queue, I guess. He can take a while to get ready in the morning. He's a big boy, you know. I don't feel I need to keep track of his every move.”

“So if we were to check the time of your latest order yesterday evening, we would find it was well before half six? Or better yet, if we were to send a unit out to your humble little abode to

perform a welfare check, we wouldn't find Claude grievously injured and not long for this world?"

"What?"

Simone was caught completely off guard. She felt her lips inexplicably part, and an irrepressible wave of shock rippled across her face as the atrocious realisation that she had been made thundered horribly inside her head. Thankfully, a harsh soprano cry interrupted Simone's interrogation at the most opportune of moments.

"Get off me! I swear I wasn't there! I never did anything! Ask my husband! Please, let me call my husband!"

A woman of no more than twenty was being viciously torn from her moped by two peacekeepers about twenty feet to Simone's left. Her dark eyes were wild with fear and pleading. She bore a fresh graze underneath her right eye. All the proof they needed that she must have been involved last night. Small though she was, the girl was writhing and struggling with such a desperate tenacity that the two peacekeepers were having considerable difficulty subduing her and had to beckon forth the mountain of a man who had been interrogating Simone. The beast rushed forth and yanked the girl violently from underneath her armpits, thrusting her five feet into the air and slamming her down on the concrete, in turn prompting a hair-raising wail from the tormented girl's agape mouth. What a brutal, unjust scene it was. The peacekeepers were now raining down heavy blows all over the girl's floundering body.

"Ow! She fucking bit me!"

"Stupid little bitch!"

The big one swung back his giant foot and made sickening contact with the jaw of the girl, which resonated in a grotesque crack, rippling throughout the aghast crowd.

Incensed admonishments began to ring out from the enraged masses.

“What have you cunts done!”

“You’ve fucking killed her!”

“Fucking heroes you lot. Three on one. How brave.”

And then.

“Long live the runners! Death to the elevants! Death to SHIPPR!”

A moped came furiously roaring through the parted crowd, making a beeline for the fracas, and slammed hideously into the leviathan peacekeeper, splattering blood and viscera over his colleagues. And so it was to be. For the second time in twelve hours, coincidentally also just the second time in many decades, the munch runners had devolved into a savage display of irate, righteous insubordination. Masses of bodies began to break their orderly queues, all swarming upon the peacekeepers who had been restraining the now-limp young woman. The awful cacophony of engines, screams and gunfire reverberated around the turnpike. Bodies began to crumple, runners and peacekeepers alike. Mopeds were pushed onto their sides, and the air was again thick with the horribly intoxicating mixture of petrol and burnt rubber. Inching away from the brawl towards the turnpike, something akin to relief flooded Simone’s body in cathartic waves. Terrible as the incident unfolding before her eyes was, it undoubtedly meant that Claude’s whereabouts and the details of her deliveries last night had been shuffled far down the pecking order of prioritisation. She glanced quickly towards the turnpike and then at the pandemonium behind her.

“Fuck it.”

Revvng her engine, Simone sped away from the nightmarish scene, telling herself the decision to flee rather than fight had been a much harder one to make than it actually was as she went.

*

With the violence she fled still reverberating through every minute particle of her person, Simone worked most assiduously. She was a well-lubricated, unwaveringly efficient machine that transformed mediocre takeaway food into five-star reviews. The sushi stand melted into the grocery store, which transmuted into the grog shop, which sealed itself in a shiny chrysalis and emerged out the other side as a kebab truck adorned all the way around with garish Christmas lights. Five stars. Five stars. Five stars. Five stars. The news of the riots had not subdued the want for takeaway food inside the stomachs of the elevants in the slightest. In fact, Simone found that she had barely a moment to collect herself between orders, such was the speed in which the next one arrived. What was more, Simone could detect a sort of hungry curiosity in the eyes of the elevants whose doorstep she darkened, as if they were keenly waiting for her to explode and rush towards them in animalistic anger. Elevants did have a famous sense of theatre and love of a good spectacle, and Simone guessed this was something akin to going to the zoo for them, except the chimps were bringing them burritos and naturally may decide to rip their faces off at any given moment. Simone, for her part, sunk all anxiety or fear she may have held down deep inside her darkest recesses and greeted her customers with the widest of artificial smiles, plastering them across her face as if doing so were the most rudimentary of bodily functions. After ten long hours of flawless yet agonising deliveries, Simone came upon her last order of the day. Order one hundred and seventy-six. Simone blinked. One hundred and seventy-six.

“Holy shit.”

She had not just broken her own personal record, a record that had stood for over ten years, but eclipsed it by nearly double. A chilling tingle of ecstasy swept across Simone’s skin. Tomorrow.

She could feel it. Taste it. Eighty-four orders left to go. She had more than doubled that today. The hunger for spectacle and takeaway food amongst the elevants was more ravenous than it had ever been. Tomorrow was going to be her last day. Then she and Claude would be safe. Free at last. Simone had no recollection of picking up the overpriced hamburger deal which constituted her final order of the day, nor of the commute towards the house to which she was delivering it, and before she could register anything at all, internally or externally, she was standing on the doorstep of one of the more modest elevant dwellings she had seen. Simone knocked absently at the door.

“Coming!” An elderly feminine voice responded. Simone was sucked back into awareness by the voice. It was oddly soothing. Maternal. It had a conspicuous lack of elevant accent.

The door swung open very slowly, as if being pushed by the most gentle of breezes.

“Hello dear. Aren’t you a pretty thing?” A short, stout woman of around seventy-five beamed upward at Simone.

Simone stood there motionless, mouth slightly ajar, arm extended holding the order. There was something about this old lady which rustled up a deep sense of kinship within her, warming the deepest cockles of her heart and harking back to a safe, infantile feeling that had been long lost since days of early childhood. Like suckling on mother’s breast. Like being securely entombed in the warmest womb. Stable. Safe at last.

“Don’t you want to come in, dear? It’s dreadfully cold and wet out.”

“Yes, please.” Simone gasped, tiptoeing across the threshold into the warm home of this wonderfully inviting septuagenarian.

“Shall I fix us up some tea? Some cucumber sandwiches, perhaps? This food isn’t for me; it’s far too greasy for my old guts, you see. It’s for my son, Patrick. Only eats hamburgers and chips, the silly little bugger.”

“Paddy-boy! Dinner’s ready!” The old woman called, raising a trembling hand up to her wrinkly lips.

There was a rumbling noise, and then a stocky man in his mid-forties came bounding down the stairs into the kitchen.

“Mama. Burger here. Mama. Burger, please. Chips too. Burger and chips please. Fizzy drink as well. For Paddy-boy. For Paddy-boy. Dinnertime. Yes. Dinnertime for Paddy-boy. Say yes.”

Patrick stumbled towards his mother, taking her small head in his large, fleshy hands and stroking her grey, wiry hair with the utmost care and gentle devotion. He was humming a jaunty little tune whilst swaying from foot to foot; his plump, scarlet lips split into an impossibly wide grin of pure glee.

"Yes, of course, my love! Here you go, my big beautiful boy." Patrick took the takeaway container from his mother and echoed

“Big beautiful boy.”

“Make sure you get a plate.”

“Get a plate.”

"That's it. Aren't you a good boy?"

“Good boy. Paddy is a good boy. TV too? TV and dinner? Or no TV and dinner? Please, Mama, say yes.”

"Oh, if you must.”

“If you must.” Patrick gave his mother’s hair a final loving caress and wandered off towards the couch, taking with him a plate in one hand and the paper bag containing his dinner in the other. Soon a children’s programme was blaring out from the television, and Patrick, rocking back and forth against the couch, began to giggle and repeat the lines of each character, replicating every cartoonish voice with pinpoint echolalic accuracy and smearing his mouth with ketchup and onion grease as he tucked enthusiastically into his hamburger.

Simone stared intently at the elderly mother, noticing the loving smile working its way into each ancient line of her face, and was struck by an intense, but fleeting, pang of sadness and envy.

“That’s my boy.” The elderly woman said just above a whisper, her frail and inward-bent chest swelling with pride as she spoke.

“I didn’t catch your name by the way, dear.” The elderly woman said after a few long, silent moments, with a little hint of surprise, seeming to momentarily forget the presence of a stranger in her home.

“Simone.”

“Irene. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Simone.” Irene smiled kindly and extended a wrinkled old claw, which Simone took and was surprised by the warmth she felt upon taking it.

“I’m pleased to meet you too, Irene. Thanks for letting me inside.” For the first time in what might have been months, Simone felt a genuine, in no way forced, smile work its way across her mouth.

“Tough day to be doing your kind of job!” Irene said with a little chuckle, wandering off to the now-boiling kettle.

“Of course, I had plenty of days like this back in the day too, so I can sympathise rather easily. I elevated, you see. A very long time ago now, going on forty-six years. Paddy was born the year after, and as you can see, he’s getting on a bit now too!”

Simone nearly fell off her chair.

“You elevated? Oh my god, I’m about to elevate too! Shouldn’t take me more than a couple days. I’ve only got eighty-four orders to go. Wow! You must be the last person that elevated! Can I say that I’m honoured to meet you?”

“Only person to elevate.” Irene’s voice had suddenly assumed a stern tone, and her once kind expression hardened considerably. She parked the teacup roughly in front of Simone, and some of the tea lapped over the edges of the cup onto the table.

“They count it as two, because my ex-husband elevated through me. The bastard. Ran off when Paddy was three. Said he couldn’t handle having a wobbly as a son.”

“I’m so sorry.” Simone was mortified. She had expected Irene’s kind countenance to intensify even further and was ready for maternal praise and congratulations to shower down all over her, rather than the curmudgeonly overshare she had been met with.

“But that is wonderful for you, my dear. Congratulations.” The kind smile had returned to Irene’s face, but her voice had not quite accompanied it.

"Thanks," Simone replied, reservedly sipping her tea. Irene finally seemed to notice the damp blanket she had thrown over Simone’s excitement and assumed a gentle yet firm tone.

“A word of advice, dear: don’t expect to be automatically treated like one of them once you’re up here. It’s a lot nicer up here than down there, don’t get me wrong, but they can all tell you aren’t really from here. The way we talk probably. Funny, really, because they are the ones who talk all funny: *‘Welcarrm to The Spirre, We’re saw glard to harv you.’* You know what I mean, dear?”

Anyways, yes, even to this day I'm a bit of an outcast up here. Well, me and Paddy. It can get terribly lonely sometimes. People always seem to act like he is the way he is because I'm from where I'm from, but that's just utter nonsense; there are plenty of others up here who are like Paddy. Even now in old age, I mean, look at me, a strong gust of wind would blow me over; I always seem to be treated with a bit of suspicion. Hospital workers, in particular, you see, I am quite old now, and I find myself having to go there for a check-up quite often."

"Hospital workers?" Simone was nonplussed.

"Yes, dear, very suspicious; they think that I'm putting it on when I ask for painkillers for my hip. They think that people from the rim can't handle their pills. They say we are 'naturally predisposed to addictive tendencies'." Rubbish, I say. There are plenty of addicts born and bred in The Spire. Some of them even seem to think that I'm giving the pills to Paddy to keep him sedated, as if I don't love him just the way he is. Lots of "I don't know how they do things where you're from" and "I understand things haven't been easy for you, but", you know, that sort of thing." Irene's words struck Simone over the back of the head with the force of a brick dropped from a skyscraper. Her heart was crushed with a terrible realisation. She choked on a sip of tea as her nose began to sting with the welling up of hot tears. If this fragile, kindly old woman who had made the unforgivable social faux pas of being a runner close to half a century ago were met by the elevants with a degree of suspicion and distrust, then she couldn't imagine how they would react to scrappy-looking, newly elevated Claude turning up at the hospital on day one with a festering gunshot wound.

"Something the matter, dear?"

“No, no, everything is fine. I really should get going though; it’s late after all. My partner will be beginning to worry.” Simone hastily leapt up from her seat and started towards the door, feigning a coughing fit, trying to shield her weeping face in her arm.

“But you haven’t even finished your cup of tea, dear! Can’t you stay a little longer? It’s so rare Paddy and I have company these days.” Irene called, desperation rising in her frail old voice.

“I’m really sorry, Irene, but no. I can’t stay. I’m so sorry; I really am.” Simone couldn’t stop the tidal wave that had been building up behind her nose, and she now sobbed freely as she hurried herself out the door towards her moped. The last thing she heard as she disappeared into the downpour was Paddy’s low, sweet voice calling out

“Mama! She’s crying! Sad lady. Poor lady. Don’t worry. Better soon. Bye-bye! Bye-bye!”

*

By the time Simone arrived home, Claude was stiff as a board. Cold. Rigid. Dead. Lying supine, vacant, unblinking eyes wide open, focused upward on the ceiling, Claude had evidently awoken one last time to enter something close to consciousness before he succumbed to the injury he was doomed to yield to. The bottle of pills next to his pillow was empty. A string of silvery drool loitered around his lips. Simone, for her part, was too exhausted, both emotionally and physically, to register his passing, and she slumped down by his side to commence an instant, all-consuming sleep. There were no dreams on that night. No park. No bench. No sun disappearing behind the river. No horrible giant Claude moth. Only darkness. When Simone awoke the next morning, for a blissful moment, she felt an intense comfort, the echo of Irene’s soothing voice buzzing about her head; however, this moment lasted only precisely as long as it possibly could have, and it didn’t take Simone long thereafter to discover Claude’s newly deceased state. Simone expected to dissolve into a mess of grief and tears, yet nothing came. She

just stood still about five feet from Claude and the bed, head slightly tilted in a janky expression of what could have been mild shock, and then a grotesque fluttering noise was accompanied by a small, horrid winged insect landing squarely on Claude's forehead. The moth.

Simone felt now. Oh how she felt. An awful bubbling ruptured upward inside her innards, and she was overcome by a deep and terrible rage. Furious anger began to spill uncontrollably from her every pore.

“You stupid fuck! You useless cunt! All you had to fucking do was just go out there and ride your bike around for at most another week, and you couldn't even fucking do that, could you? You worthless prick. The biggest fucking mistake I have ever made in my entire miserable fucking life was ever looking your wretched way, you selfish fucking bastard. You just had to be the man, didn't you? You just couldn't let it go! You just had to go and get shot in the ass! A fucking couple days off elevating too. I carried your lazy ass for fifteen fucking years, and for what? I worked so fucking hard to provide a life we could only ever dream of, and you just had to throw it all away. Well, you know what? I am actually fucking relieved that you are dead! It's actually justice, Claude, if you think about it. Why the fuck should you have ever got to enjoy the benefits of my hard work, and why the fuck should I be penalised for your sloppiness?” The tirade that had just been exorcised from deep within Simone's now irrevocably darkened heart hung heavily upon the musty air of the room. Claude gave no reply, and Simone, realising that none would be forthcoming anytime soon, stormed out of the room, leaving Claude alone in the room with the moth as his sole mourner. The commute was a breeze. The streets were a lot emptier than usual. There were no peacekeepers present on this clear morning, yet dozens of SPOTs lined the streets, all racing towards the turnpike, now affixed with semi-automatic turrets protruding out the top of their smiling heads. When Simone reached The Spire, one of them

gunned down a human courier carrying a brown paper bag and swooped down upon his fallen order, taking it for itself to deliver, droning on as it went

“Courier detected operating during rush hour, threat neutralised, order to be delivered. Courier detected operating during rush hour, threat neutralised, order to be delivered...”

Despite their newfound enhancements, Simone easily outstripped any machine on that day after the breakfast rush was completed, reaching her eighty-four order mark by only three in the afternoon. She had done it. No more orders. Simone decided to spend the next hour or two sitting in her favourite park, the one she had been dreaming of, and then she would go to the Employee Elevation Bureau in central to make the thing official. Speeding down the arterial road which led to the gardens, Simone was struck by a phenomenal sight in the opposite lane. No. It couldn't possibly be. Three large, grey kangaroos were bounding across the asphalt. How truly miraculous this sight was to behold. The roos bounced swiftly and with an unshakeable purpose, outstripping legions of SPOTs with little effort, leaving the machines swivelling helplessly in their wake. Simone grinned from ear to ear, eyes unwaveringly affixed to the gracefully leaping roos, happy, and never quite seeing the minivan pulling out swiftly from the side street, never quite hearing the horn so impossibly loud, and never quite feeling her feeble, bone-weary body being crushed between the screeching wheels of the unseen vehicle assailant and the cold, harsh tarmac.

