

## HONEST

*by Amos Kwok*

Hum of a bus. Snore of a man. Two regular rhythms in a life turned upside down. I push deeper into the seat, eyes closed against the view. Gone is the country whizzing by. Gone is the blur of cars. Gone is the life I know. I try to imagine Sydney: towering blocks of wealth; endless traffic; faceless thousands. But all I see is the glaring envelope. I try pressing the image out with a squeeze of eyelids. It doesn't work.

I give in to let my mind roam to the room where the envelope sits, propped against the night lamp. Beside it, a pewter frame holding a picture of Emily and me on the beach—zinc sunscreen, silly grins and a perfect day. I feel a flutter of the lips, the hint of a smile. Didn't matter Emily was afraid of the sun; didn't matter she complained about the heat; didn't matter it took an hour's cajoling to get her into the water... I enjoyed myself and in the end, she did too.

Hum of the bus. Snore of the man. I twist to look at my neighbour. No drooping mouth. No drooling lips. No beer gut

either. Just a head, skewed to the side. Just one of the crowd, except for the goatee hanging from his chin. Using only fingertips, I reach out, take hold of Goatee's head and careful, careful... there. Maybe he won't snore with his head forward. He snorts. My fingers fly off. But Goatee merely shifts in his seat and settles down once more. No more snoring. Perfect.

It'll be eight by the time her car pulls into the driveway. She never bothers to park the car in the garage. It's my job. She'll walk into the hall, hands juggling bags of groceries, the house keys and the mail. A carton of milk, broccoli, chicken, eggs, apples, yoghurt, Kleenex, BRW and a letter from her mother... Nothing unusual. She'll call for me once, twice. No answer, of course. She'll frown over my absence. Three distinct lines between her eyebrows. I know them so well. I've learnt to watch for them. Always have to be careful when they appear. But I don't care anymore.

I've always been home for her. Always. I can picture it: heels clicking on the tiled floor, groceries settling on the kitchen counter. Living room, bedroom, bathroom, patio. Her search will yield nothing. Perhaps then she'll see the envelope resting on the bed stand. A mere slip of paper.

No! I jerk up in my seat. There's a funny tightening in my throat. I massage it. Goatee's eyes are on me. I turn, an apology on my face. He stares with unseeing eyes for just a second, then he falls back to his slumber. An urge to get up surges through me. I have to run and tell the bus driver to turn around. No! I'm not going back. I force shivering fingers to grip the seat arms. Breathe slowly. In. Out. In. Out. The urge passes. I slump back.

Do I love her? The words turned around in my head. Once I thought I did. The words churn around some more. Maybe not. Maybe never. Maybe love wasn't what I felt for Emily. Gratitude? Yes. Appreciation? That too. Mild affection? Perhaps. Lust? Definitely. Love? The word hung in the air.

Guilt, like a giant hand, squeezes me, numbs my mind. I feel dirty, like a cheap playboy. Or one of those who lives off naive women. But Emily isn't naive. Far from it. She's smart—runs her own business. What possessed her to take a penniless would-be author under her wing? Maybe she wanted a plaything.

Flitting trees drape a green scarf across the countryside. My head slides to the window. I feel the life in it. Vibrations rattling through the skull. Something falls on my lap. Goatee's hand. I scrunch my face. Gingerly picking the hairy fingers as if they were garbage, I toss

the hand back. Is there some other seat available? I push up, crane my neck. Rows of heads. No gaps.

I didn't mean to do it. Honest. But I could see it in her eyes: a desperate hunger for love. And I was hungry too, desperate for food, shelter and a little loving care. So I accepted her offer. She was happy. Why shouldn't she be? I was caring, sensitive, faithful. Never complained, never demanded. Oh yes, I was everything... except honest.

Time. I just needed time. That's my great excuse. Time to know her, time to love her. The months had gone by. Then a year. Then two. Then three. Nothing happened, nothing developed. In all those years, never once did I go out with another woman. So why do I feel like I've cheated her? What did it mean to cheat on someone? Sleeping around? Seeing someone else? Having fantasies? Or did it merely mean my heart wasn't with her? I made her happy. Wasn't that enough?

Goatee starts snoring again. The thought of touching him once more is nauseating. An elbow perhaps? I raise an arm, aim at his ribs... Jab. Goatee jumps, hand leaping to his side. He snorts, rubs himself, turns over. No more snores.

A month ago, everything came apart. Emily had snuggled up to me in bed, surreptitiously sliding her arms beneath and around my back, leaning close to look at my face. I

could taste the mint of her toothpaste, feel her breath on my cheeks. Her body was warm. Inviting. She'd started telling me about Jane's recent marriage. How happy she was, how in love, how wonderful... Beneath the innocent babble, there was something else. Something in her voice, in the way she watched me. Her eyes: they were wide and questioning as she fed me every last detail. She hadn't asked anything. There was no need. I knew exactly what she wanted. I remembered smiling, telling her I was tired. We'll talk in the morning. Disappointment showed through every movement of her body. What could I do? I wasn't ready for that.

Emily is well-to-do. Great body. We get along. Most of all, she loves me. But I don't love her. Maybe it'll be all right for the present to be husband and wife. But ten years from now? Maybe if I try harder, I can learn to love her... But haven't I tried for three years? I can't lie, can't go on for a lifetime pretending. It's time to be honest.

It's the only decent thing to do. To leave was to kill her. To stay was to kill us both. Is that fair? To run and leave Emily so abruptly? She'd given me everything. And I was killing her now. She's strong. I know she is. Strong enough to survive this shock. She'll find someone else. Or will she be tomorrow's headline? What can I do now? The envelope is miles away.

Dear Emily,

Before I say anything else I just want to tell you I love you. I never told you this before but a long time ago, I stole some money from a company I worked for. I ran away and after awhile I thought I got away with it. But now they've found me. I don't want to involve you so I'm leaving. Don't look for me. It's better this way. I never meant to hurt you but I know I have. You deserve better than me. I'm sorry. Goodbye, Emily.

John

Ends

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