

## Only mandarins

There is a girl, Sally, who I have worked with for some time. We first met in our office, on the eleventh floor. The office is high enough up inside the building to let the sunlight in through the window behind us, in the late day it can be seen, breaking up and diffusing on the walls—that low afternoon, sleep-making light. She sits next to me, in the desk adjacent to mine, and though there is a privacy screen between our cubicles, through a thin opening, I can just make her out. It is through this opening that I look at Sally, and I steal away and keep in my thoughts her picture in profile through the opening. I can see, in my mind, the way that her lip droops down at one side in concentration. I can picture, almost unconsciously, how she drags one side of her fringe over to the other, lets it fall, then returns it with a slow shake of her head. I have developed her as one would develop photographs, I have processed these Sally-negatives until they bled clear in my mind. She rolls blue shirtsleeves up her forearms, drinks tea, taps keys. She exists, mostly like this, in images.

It was morning, and she had not been in yet—at least what might have remained of her profile, severed tauntingly by the thin opening in the plastic screen that separated us. I was instead tapped, teasingly, on the shoulder. She came upon me unnoticed. She was saying something to me. Sally, who was standing behind me, was saying something about a Christmas party. ‘Remember the Christmas party.’ She was mostly saying. I nodded in agreement. I remembered the time of year, the length of days, and the long, winding demise of the sun in December, theatre-sun, which drew out its death. So I supposed it was December, and yes, there was a tinsel temperament to the office, now that I noted it—redolent of crinkled mylar, of plastic shining in the sunlight. I looked up at Sally, who was wearing a ponytail, different to how I had remembered her, different to how she appeared in my images. ‘New ponytail.’ I said, and I reached upward, and I took it between my fingers as if it were a novel plant, some vegetal curio plucked from a streetside garden.

This act of intimacy, as yet untested between us, surprised me as it began, but it was, by then, too late for hesitation. This was pause that proved unnecessary; she rejected my gesticulation gently, with a brush of warm fingers, and batted me away so weakly as to suggest underlying acceptance, so I thought. Between

my fingers I had taken her ponytail, I thought, a ponytail of piling red and white felt, rough and cheap. At the end, strangely, dangled a lone white pom-pom. She was wearing a Santa hat of throwaway office grade; she had had her hair cut short for months now, I recalled. 'I cut my hair short months ago.' She said, laughing. She returned to her desk and to her thin picture frame, a grey-green plastic divider frame. Another image lodged in my mind.

It was at the work Christmas party, which turned out to be later that evening, when I noticed Sally's leg brush against mine, I thought, her long, stocking-enshrined leg, and I felt the friction of our fabric grains in contradiction with each other. I looked up at her, my head aswim with beer already, the day already dead. She was saying something about Christmas. 'It just seemed to come so early this year. Though I suppose it does every year.' She said. Her eye met mine. I looked down, down at her leg, which was not a leg but an umbrella, a black umbrella leaning against the table, brushing against my leg. The night was opened up, black and immense, dripping with stars that shone un-shy of cloud, far above the rooftop bar where we sat. Sally's face, a tallow thing in the pub-light. I caught a glimpse, then back down again, still no stocking leg; it was supposed to rain later, someone said.

In the bathroom I stood slightly listing at the urinal and looked at my distorted face in the bevelled mirror of plumbing. With the other hand, I began plastering my hair, which was now wet, to one side, Sally-conscious. I was unzipping my fly when a colleague of mine, Justin, came in. I watched him through the plumbing as he proceeded, gait marred inelegantly, the collapsing stride of an inebriate. His slurred voice further betrayed his intoxication. 'You're not even festive, man.' He said. He struggled to remove some felt antlers, I thought, perched askew atop his bald head. He stepped unsurely and ran his fingers through his hair. 'Lost my antlers.' He said. We laughed. Justin concaved and convexed in my darkling mirror and reached for my shoulder with an unstable gesture of kindness that betrayed a condescension long harboured.

Justin's clammy hand; I felt it atop my left shoulder's bony rampart; through the mirror, he caught my buckled eye. Then, as he came closer, his face and mine seemed to merge in the reflection, like two water droplets they met and formed one. It would have looked like I was wearing the antlers, if he had been wearing them, I thought. Sally was at the bar, alone, waiting for a drink. That's what Justin said to me.

‘She’s all alone out there, man. I reckon tonight’s the night, hey?’ He unzipped, still speaking, and he moved to the adjacent urinal. Then followed a faint dripping, faster, cresting to a steady stream. Justin flowed with all the liberty of a man freed from unjust imprisonment, and I, not incurious, noted his froth marbled cider ebb and realised, none too quickly, my own nether’s incompetence. I did not reply.

Later, outside the bar, as the dregs of the crowd trickled out into the city, Sally asked me for a lighter, which I did not have, proceeded to produce one from the depths of her bag, which she probed frustratedly, then offered me a cigarette, which I took and lit and smoked and I was risen slightly from my stupor. It was then that I realised the dearth of coworkers about us—that the low roar of revelry had abated. Only the spare words between us now broke the night’s silence. She asked me plainly, ‘Do you want to get a taxi together?’ The quaint employ of the word taxi, in place of Uber or Didi, charmed me. Quaint were also the associations I harboured with this word, first New York City, then checkerboard and the seventies. Then *taxis*, namely my own, my parataxis, the spirituous dimming of my diction, recent responses had included: ‘I like gin and tonic too.’ And ‘Yes.’

In the car, Sally’s hand alighted gently upon my own, considered or not, I did not know. We arrived first at her apartment, and though Sally had made a show of asking my address, the taciturn driver, prompted by Sally’s ‘I’m sure that I added it,’ responded only with a shrug. We took to the pavement awkwardly. ‘It’s okay, I’ll just get another car,’ I said. And though I felt myself a foreign body, unwelcome in Sally-environs, nonetheless there I was, lounged on Sally’s couch, as she entwined a drink with my hand, I thought, before my lips were pressed clumsily by a soft fruit, a mandarin segment, I thought, perhaps, the juice perspiring my lips, and Sally’s breasts, I saw, soft and warm on the approach, my hands grasped at them childlike, through the cellophane veneer of her blouse, which read; *made from at least 80% recycled plastic*. In my kitchen, in my apartment, it was morning. I unclenched my hands and drew them away from the plastic bag. Inside there was only fruit, loose mandarins.