

## **Landslide**

The clock above the kitchen door is loud. It is almost one; at three they must leave. A million times Ana has pictured the final walk with her son, Ricardo, through the village, up the hill to the coast road where he will get the bus to the airport in Sao Paulo and she must say goodbye. But she cannot imagine that final moment, cannot bring herself to picture that. She drags the back of her wrist across her forehead. He must eat before he goes. She reaches for the slab of beef she bought this morning, his favourite cut, and turns on the tap. The water is cool as she rinses the blood from the meat.

Through the wall, she hears his voice but she cannot hear what he is saying. She tears a piece of paper towel from the roll and starts to pat the meat dry. He'll be stretched out on his bed in t-shirt and shorts, his hand pillowing his head, his legs so long now his feet hang over the edge. She remembers him as a child, curled up in the middle of that same bed in a tangle of sheets, eyelids twitching as he dreamed. No doubt it's Tomàs on the phone. The two of them have been thick as thieves ever since Tomàs suggested Ricardo go with him to find work in London.

"That's impossible," she told Ricardo, her arms locked across her chest when he told her their plan late one night when she got in from work. "How will you get there? We don't have the money." And the next day he called his father. His father, who in nineteen years hasn't put a single centavo on the table towards his son's food, clothes or rent; who, that very day, transferred the money for the flight. She turns to the stove and punches the ignition. A blue flame leaps up and she slams the frying pan down on top of it.

"Mãe?" She startles. Ricardo is leaning against the doorframe, as slender as a young tree, his black curls clipped close to his scalp. "Tomás called. He's on his way to the airport, the traffic is heavy, I need to get an earlier bus." It feels as if a wave has slammed into her, sent her staggering.

"You have to eat," she says.

"I can make a sandwich," he protests.

"No," she insists, "a proper meal." She turns back to the stove, sloshes oil into the pan; it hisses. She jabs the beef with a fork and drops it into the bubbling fat.

"But, Mãe."

She spins around, pointing the fork at him. "I left work to cook you this meal," she says, "you will sit down and eat it."

For weeks now she's been working longer hours at the hotel. She tells him it's to get extra money for his trip but in truth she doesn't know how to be near him, doesn't know what to say to him. She turns down the gas; the meat simmers gently in its juices. "Please, *filho*, sit," she says. "You don't have to go just yet."

She heaps two spoonfuls of rice onto a plate, ladles steaming beans and a forkful of *couvé* on top and sets the plate down gently on the table. Ricardo slips into his seat, picks up the knife and fork and slowly lowers his head to eat. A stripe of paler skin edges his hair where it's been cut. She feels an urge to trace the line with her finger, but instead she returns to the stove, grabs an onion from the bowl and rips off its papery white skin. She presses it to the wooden chopping board and attacks it with the knife - rat-a-tat-tat.

"Mãe, it'll be fine," Ricardo says quietly, "I'll be back."

She inhales sharply and sweeps the crescents into the frying pan alongside the steak. "In London, you must eat properly every day," she tells him, shoving the onions around the pan with a wooden spoon.

"Yes," he sighs.

"A hot meal. Otherwise you'll get ill. Make sure you take your vitamins. And wear those vests I bought; it will be cold there and you are not used to cold like theirs." She arranges the steak and onions on a metal serving dish and takes it to him at the table. He glances at the clock.

"I don't have time," he pleads, "I need to get the earlier bus."

Beneath his chair his heel bounces. He used to do this at school and kids would complain that the desk they shared wobbled. For years, before he set out for class, she would remind him to sit with both feet flat on the floor so as not to disturb the others.

"Of course you have time to eat," she says, nudging the dish closer to him. "It's your favourite."

He stares at the steaming steak and, with his knife and fork, drags a piece onto his plate. He starts to saw an edge.

"Aren't you going to eat?" he asks.

"I will. Later," she replies, turning away. The onion skin curls on the chopping board. She hasn't felt hungry all week. In the street, a motorcycle revs.

"No. Thanks, Mãe, but I really don't have time," Ricardo says, his cutlery clattering onto his plate, his chair screeching as he pushes back from the table. "I'll get my bag and then we'll go." And without looking at her, he strides out of the kitchen and this moment, that has seemed like a speck on the horizon, looms in front of her like a dense, concrete wall, so close she can almost feel its rough graze on her cheek, smell its damp chill. What if he meets an English girl and stays? Life is easier there: they can make money, have children. What if he only ever returns for a holiday, for a few weeks? She couldn't cope with his leaving again.

"You ready?" He stands in front of her, checking his passport, its shiny blue cover stamped with gold writing. She feels as if her knees might give way. "Come on," he insists, swinging his

backpack onto his shoulders. She nods. He tips his borrowed black suitcase onto its wheels and opens the front door. The *tzz, tzz* of the cicadas floods in.

He's barely eaten; he needs to eat more. Ana empties a bag of bread rolls, grabs one, rips out its soft centre and forks a piece of steak into its middle. She wraps the sandwich in plastic and shoves it into her handbag, next to the envelope with the \$50 she's saved. Her stomach quivers as she locks the front door. A sea breeze lifts her hair from her forehead. Ricardo's football has rolled into the shadow of the concrete wall.

He's striding ahead, his suitcase bouncing across the flints. On the other side of the road, Seu Antônio sits slumped in a white plastic chair, his chin sunk to his bare, wrinkled chest. His son left for Portugal ten years ago. He said he'd be back. He's returned once, for a week, after Seu Antônio had his stroke.

Ana hurries into the lane, into the full blast of the sun, trotting to catch up with Ricardo. The stones press sharply into the soles of her flip flops. She passes the neighbours' houses with their red tiled roofs and flaky paintwork, behind them the dark green of the forest and the towering fortress-wall of the rocky *serra*.

At the t-junction, they turn left down the road that runs through the centre of the village. There's a bicycle tossed into the dusty oleander bush, its back wheel missing. Later, the road will be a stream of SUVs bouncing over the potholes, in search of dinner and caipirinhas and the disco at the hotel. For now, though, the village is quiet, the tourists hidden from view, lounging under umbrellas on the beach or sheltering in air-conditioned bedrooms or hotel bars.

On her right are the sea-facing villas; she used to clean three of them before she started at the hotel. Children's laughter and shrieks float up over the high, white-washed walls. One gate is ajar: there's a tidy square of thick-bladed grass, a sprinkler in the middle of it whirling sheets of mist into the hot air. In between the houses, at the end of narrow, shaded alleyways, she

glimpses the beach and beyond that, the flat sea. Tomorrow he'll be 10,000 kilometres away on the northern edge of that ocean. She forces her gaze back to the road.

They pass Toni's Pizzeria on the left with its trellised dining area and there are Renata and Flávia, draped across the doorway, deep in conversation. Ricardo calls their names and they bound over to him, flinging their arms around his neck.

"We thought you were getting the later bus!" they cry. They are like foals, these girls: long-legged, unsteady in their heeled sandals.

"Traffic's bad. Can't miss that flight," her son replies, a smile splitting his face. The girls grin, then he kisses each one, sweeps up the handle of his suitcase and backs away. "Come and visit me in London!" he calls.

"Ciao, Ri! We will," they reply, blowing kisses. As Ana passes, they nod politely. "*Bom dia, Tía,*" they say. Straight ahead, the buildings and bushes are getting hazy.

They are reaching the centre of the village now. On the right is the grocery store, crates of mangoes stacked outside.

"Almost there," Ricardo says, smiling down at her.

"Water," Ana mutters, "the bus will be hot and stuffy, you'll be thirsty," and she hurries towards the store.

"But there isn't time," he calls. She hears the slap of his hand against his shorts, pictures the heave of his shoulders, the set of his mouth.

She shoves open the glass door and a bell jangles. A television blares from the corner. She slips a packet of tissues from the cosmetics shelf, plucks a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Letitia sits on a stool behind the counter, one hand resting on her pregnant belly which is as firm and round as a watermelon. Little Fernandinho stands by her side in shorts, clutching his football. The bell jangles again and she hears Ricardo's voice, anger simmering beneath it like a saucepan

of water, "Mãe! The bus is almost due".

"Just a minute," she calls, searching for her purse.

"It's today he's leaving?" Letitia asks. "Three reais," she adds. Ana slides the coins towards her. A pressure is building behind her eyes and in her throat. If she speaks it will surge forwards; she just nods.

"Everything will work out fine," Letitia whispers, "he'll be back," she says, "God willing," and she touches the gold cross dangling at her neck.

Ana cradles the purchases to her chest. As she leaves the store a headline on the television catches her attention: a dam has collapsed at a mine in the centre of the country. She stops and watches as an enormous embankment, the size of several football pitches, starts to slip, then plunges, releasing a wave of red earth and rocks that engulfs buildings, trees, trucks. "A national tragedy: hundreds are dead," the newsreader exclaims. The camera zooms in: tiny people, the size of ants, scurry back and forth, trying to avoid the collapsing ground, trying to reach a place of safety. A cry rises in Ana's throat, her hand leaps to her mouth to stop it.

Outside the store, Ricardo stares up towards the gap between the trees a few hundred metres ahead. A line of trucks and cars flashes past, a grey haze shimmering above it. Ana hands him the cold bottle of water and digs in her bag for the sandwich and the envelope of money. "It isn't much," she starts to tell him but he grabs them without looking at her and shoves them into the front pocket of his backpack. He sets off, his stride long and hurried, his suitcase jackknifing behind him.

Ana watches as he passes the estate agents, the pharmacy, the sushi restaurant, crossing the uneven flagstones that stretch all the way up to the highway. She imagines the rumble of traffic and the grinding of gears getting louder as the trucks prepare for the upcoming bend, his breath shortening, calves tightening as the road steepens near the top, the stench of diesel fumes.

He has almost reached the highway. He looks so small she could cup him in her hand. He turns, expecting to see her just behind him. His head moves as he searches the road for her, then spots her, standing still in front of the grocery store. He lifts both arms wide, palms up, questioning. She clings to the strap of her handbag, as if that might somehow steady her, might stop the trembling in her body.

He hears the bus before she does. He turns, grabs his suitcase and sprints the final few metres to the highway, just as the yellow airport bus emerges from the trees. He stands at the edge of the road, his right heel bouncing up and down, his head flicking left and right, searching for a gap. Ana's heart is a hummingbird in her chest. He slips into the traffic and is gone. Cars and trucks speed past, a klaxon blares.

Ana reaches for one of Letitia's plastic chairs and lowers herself into it. Her phone buzzes. "What happened?" he texts. "Why didn't you come? Why didn't you say goodbye?" Again, pressure surges up in her throat, behind her eyes, threatens to spill, but she pinches the bridge of her nose, digs her thumb and finger into the corner of both eyes. It is better this way, she tells herself.

Slowly, the sun weaves between the palm trees. The smell of burning wood drifts to her on the breeze, a clatter rises from the restaurant kitchens, metal shutters rattle as shops prepare to open for the evening. Behind her, Fernandinho's flip flops shuffle back and forth across the hardened dirt; she hears the repeated thud of his football bouncing off the wall. In her lap, her fingers twist tissues until they disintegrate.

She stays there, as the sun slips behind the *serra* and darkness gathers amongst the trees. Soon the headlights of the first SUVs will start to sway down the road into the village, in search of dinner and caipirinhas and dancing. She is expected at the hotel at seven.