

Fatigue Markers

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The instructions were clear. But as we stood at the mouth of the cave, Dr Lavigne repeated them again, just in case.

“Whenever you wake up call out to the crew. They will be tracking your circadian rhythms. Keep at least one lamp lit at all times. Whenever you are walking, keep your left hand connected to the wall—there are several passageways we were unable to barricade. Use the bucket provided, just cover it with a lid. We will not be able to collect your excrement until after the experiment ends.”

Dr Lavigne paused. He appeared reluctant to read out the final rule.

“And remember,” he said, his voice faint and rushed, as if he had been forced to include the rule by the university’s legal team. “This experiment ends only when you choose to emerge. Only you have the power to abort it.”

I had already read the rules several times and discussed them at length with Robert. It was a typical winter’s afternoon in Sydney, broad skies made cruel by a bitter headwind, when we reviewed the rules one last time.

“Simone, please,” said Robert.

I kept my head bowed. He wanted me to make an oath. He could be surprisingly childish like that—pinkie promises and an unending regime of superstitions.

I pictured his face as the research team bundled me into a harness, preparing to lower me into the earth. His bright eyes, lips lined with tension, pinkie outstretched.

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Day 3: For the first day or so of the experiment, my chest hurt. My skin felt terrible and tight. It took me an embarrassingly long time to realise that I had been holding my breath, as if being subterranean were the same as diving into the sea.

It isn’t, of course.

The cave is a magnificent structure. The limestone arches above me like the ribbed ceiling of a cathedral, high and certain and musical. The walls are thick and damp. The air is cool and continuously circulating.

With every lamp lit I sit myself in a pool of buttery light. I have been instructed to yell out the day and time at regular intervals. The research team are measuring my ability to keep track of time. Throughout the day I can hear them chattering, their voices distant and indistinct. And whenever the team goes quiet, I feel something shoulder itself up against me.

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After approving my leave application, my manager asked what I planned on doing with “all that time off.”

“I’m going to France.”

“Oh, thank God, I was beginning to worry about you. Ever since . . .” It took her a few moments to find a semblance of composure. “You’ve been burying yourself in work.”

I laughed. She joined in, reluctant at first. But soon our laughter found a kind of gothic harmony.

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Day 4: I packed one book. I was allowed to bring as many as I liked. Dr Lavigne had said via email that books are *inert objects*. He explained that unlike smart phones and watches, books don't display time. I could think of dozens of ways to dispute this but didn't just in case he'd add books to the list of banned objects along with radios, MP3 players and cardiac pacemakers.

My sister—who had watched me pack while attempting to stage an intervention between sips of coffee—scoffed when she saw the title.

“*The Book of Symbols*? Simone, aren't you being a little melodramatic?”

Only she and Mum could get away with saying that. Everyone else was more tentative with my grief. Or afraid of it, perhaps.

I don't open the book until day three or four, allowing the anticipation to build. I'd kept it wrapped in a plastic bag. But still water had seeped in.

I devote time to gently mopping the cover dry. The pages feel soft, almost fleshy. There are hundreds of images of stones, feathers, waves, stars, birds, anchors, coins, trees. I had expected some kind magic to occur. A feeling of warmth, connection or epiphany. The lamp throws off shadows. My eyes lose focus. The Holter monitor around my neck feels heavy.

Unsettled by the vertigo of fresh grief, I close the book and slip it back into the plastic bag. Grabbing the handles, I tie a knot: looping, tightening, suffocating.

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Robert stayed in Sydney. I was greeted at Charles de Gaulle by Henri, one of Dr Lavigne's research assistants. Henri insisted on hiring a luggage trolley.

“But I've only got this. Nothing else.” I tugged at the straps of my backpack, which Robert had once used as a schoolbag.

“I insist.”

By the time we arrived at the hospital, I had gotten used to Henri saying this again and again: *I insist*.

After Dr Lavigne's team finished examining my heart, lungs, brain, blood, stomach and urine, it was almost a relief to see Henri waiting for me, patiently guarding Robert's schoolbag. His insistence continuous and comforting.

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Day 6: A day ago the lamps went out. Or maybe it was an hour or even minute ago. I am plunged into darkness.

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“We have the opportunity to understand how our bodies perceive time,” Dr Lavigne said when I arrived at the research camp. His cheeks and nose were smarting with sunburn.

“If we can locate the clock within our bodies, I *know* that we will be able to gain control over how we perceive the world. We have the potential to tap into something significant for the human species. Reverse aging, recode our bodies, heal past traumas.”

I nodded along as he spoke. We had Zoomed several times in the past six months. By now I knew not to interrupt him, knowing that he would, once again, launch into a diatribe about the ‘scientific method’ and the importance of ‘field research that pushes the bounds of human physiology.’

As Dr Lavigne spoke, I looked towards the gap in the limestone, anticipating the days and weeks, possibly months, of living beneath the earth. I was briefed, again, on the rules. Only this time by a legal team who have travelled to the cave from Paris. They wore suits, form fitting and impressively free of lint.

“Are you voluntarily entering this cave?” asked the oldest lawyer. She studied my face, checking that I had understood her question.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I am.”

My response was recorded in perpetuity.

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Day 7: My stomach muscles twitch then seize. My spine curves. A moment of release follows. The smell is offensive. Soon I am sweating, again. The force of each cramp pulls me forward.

The words “contraction” and “contractual” align in my mind. As if pain is an obligation. I remember my midwife telling me to “work with it.”

*

Years ago, my sister read that sleeping helps with weight loss. She spent the summer after her final year of high school marooned in bed. Eyes closed, curtains drawn, sweating under her doona. She developed a form of insomnia. Waking in the middle of the night, she’d walk through the house, floorboards creaking underfoot.

She tells me, before I leave for France, before I am to descend into the cave, that she still suffers from *disturbed* circadian rhythms. This is her way of telling me she cares: a coded message, both indirect and self-centred.

My mother doesn’t bother with codes or veiled advice. “Do you think it’s brave, do you? Running off to sit in a cave somewhere.”

This was the third voicemail Mum had left on my phone. Robert had told her about my plan. I wasn’t intending to lie. I just hadn’t quite figured out how I was going to tell her about the experiment.

In the days leading up to my flight to Paris, she continued to call me at random times, both day and night. It was as if she was trying to sneak up and pounce. Sometimes Robert would answer my phone.

“She’s right here,” he’d say and press my phone towards me. I would push his hand away. And I’d hear her voice, thundering down the line: “Simone! You are not a child!”

*

Day 9: I am careful to keep the bucket covered. And yet, the smell intensifies from the corner of the cave. I call out to the research team. Request another bucket or two. Perhaps a bag of sawdust.

There must have been a mistranslation. The team send a bucket and a punnet of blueberries. The cave’s floor is compacted. I consider scraping at the limestone walls to gather enough dust to smother the smell of my own shit, but I don’t want to damage my nails.

*

Robert doesn’t know that I was the one who made contact.

I first discovered Dr Lavigne’s work whilst sitting in my GP’s waiting room. I had a list of bodily grievances I wanted resolved, or, at the very least, scrutinised by someone else: a

burning sensation every time I urinated; a sinister mole that had begun to sprout hairs; a stubborn flare of dermatitis that blistered across each of my elbows; a toenail harbouring fungus; and that catching feeling in my chest each time I thought about Louie.

Flicking through the pile of magazines, I spotted the headline: *The Human Time Machine*. I read only half the article before my name was called. Stuffing the magazine into my handbag, I felt light-headed as I stood up.

By the time Robert got home from work that night, I had already tracked down Dr Lavigne's email address. Our correspondence had begun.

Our bodies tick, Dr Lavigne writes to me. *And yet, there is no clock in the human brain*. Researchers have fossicked through the folds of white matter, untangled the cerebellum, peeled apart each lobe, but no timekeeper has ever been found. And yet, each of us innately understands time. We feel it slip past us, over us, through us. We swim in it. We can feel it crunch in our bones. We know when it stretches and quickens over the course of a day, over the course of lives, tidal and responsive. Most of us have felt it shudder to a stop. In a catastrophic moment of truth or horror—a diagnosis, an unexpectedly slippery patch of ground, a child galloping towards traffic—time stands still.

He asks me why I am so interested in his research. I tell him about when time had stopped for me. How, three years ago, I felt my car slide. Then spin. Bump, bump. Bump, bump. Each tyre rolling over the fatigue markers on the edge of road. Then that moment of stillness—obsolete and holy—just before the impact. It was a cold, lonely feeling on a cellular level.

This sensation, Dr Lavigne writes back to me, is what he has been trying to replicate.

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Day 11: There is nowhere for me to wash my hair in the cave. I try to run my fingers through it, but it resists my touch. Its ends splitting, knotting, weaving into a shroud.

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Robert and I met at a costume party. The theme was children's TV shows, and we both came dressed as Bananas in Pyjamas.

"Hey, B1," he said to me.

"Hey, B2."

Later, when talking to my sister, I argued that this proved he was a feminist. That he considered me to be number one.

"Simone, I don't know if I'd be going around boasting that I fucked a feminist banana."

I laughed even though I knew she was trying to be cruel. I was in already love. The sensation, though fresh, felt enduring and invincible.

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Day 14: "Day seventeen! Six pm!" I yell to the researchers. "Exercising now!"

Fifty sit-ups. Thirty jumping jacks. Twenty mountain climbers. Ten proper push-ups. I repeat this sequence several times a day. The sweat feels cleansing.

I've learned to warn the research team before I start exercising. They had gathered at the mouth of the cave when my heart rate unexpectedly kicked up a notch. They jostled one another, calling out: *Es-tu blessé? Es-tu blessé!* Only Henri thought to call out in English: "Are you hurt? Are you hurt?"

I became terribly conscious of the heart rate monitor hanging from my neck. For the first time since the experiment began, I felt as though I were being watched. Electrified with

paranoia, I scoured the cave for microphones and cameras. I imagined each frightened beat lighting up their screens. After finding no surveillance equipment it took at least a day or two for the cave to feel like home again.

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“The earth can eat you. It has teeth,” Dr Lavigne said with an uncharacteristic flourish. This was in his first email. This was before he knew that I was interested in becoming a subject in his experiment. Before he knew my story.

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Day 16: I’m sure it’s been nineteen days since I entered the cave. I have become attuned to the rhythm of growth. My body seems to thrive in the dark, like a mushroom or an immense carpet of moss. Every six days I feel my nails extend past the fleshy nub of each fingertip. I catch each one between my teeth. It is pleasurable chewing and pulling. Luxurious, even. I bite low, beyond the wick. I am late. My uterus refuses to shed. Can a body bleed without the light of the moon?

*

As soon as we found out we were expecting, Robert traded in his ute. He parked the new land cruiser out the front of our house. From the kitchen window, I watched him jump out, keys jangling in hand.

“Sim! Get out here! Check out our new car!”

We admired its ample leg room. Its deep seats, the leather only slightly cracked and faded. Its almost-new smell.

“I’ve put in a bid for a baby capsule,” I said wanting to feel just as accomplished, just as ready. “Looks as good as new.”

*

Day 17: A week or so ago, his snuffling breath appeared in my right ear. His downy skin, thin and warm. His whole-fisted grip. The let-down startled me. A trickle that felt as sudden and as violent as a flood.

Dr Lavigne had cautioned me that our bodies can take flight in the dark. I am furious that mine has had only the briefest take-off. A second’s worth of soaring. I’ve now been earth-bound for days, waiting for Louie to return to me.

*

A woman named Melanie rang a few days after I was released from hospital. She explained that she was part of the Child Death Review Team. “CDRT for short. We work for the NSW Ombudsman,” she said.

“How did you get my number?”

“Don’t worry. You’re not in trouble.”

I felt my body somehow begin to collapse inwards.

“Unfortunately, your story isn’t an uncommon occurrence,” she said before listing a string of sickening statistics about faulty child car restraints.

Robert was sitting next to me on the couch. Sensing my distress, he gestured, silently asking me to pass him the phone.

After a few minutes he hung up.

“She said that it’s their job to try and figure out what happened. That they just want to prevent it from ever happening again.”

*

Day 21: I stay in my sleeping bag all day, even as my bladder becomes full and heavy. Eventually, I hear Henri’s voice echo down the throat of the cave: “Simone? Simone? Are you ok?” His worry ringing like a knell.

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My body became marbled—metamorphic and veined with grief—as I signed dozens and dozens of cards that Robert had somehow found the fortitude to write. Years later, I wondered whether it was normal to thank people for attending a funeral. We had sent out cards after getting married, but only after months of cajoling from Robert’s mother. After the accident she no longer tutted or jollied us along. No one did. No one told us what we must do; how we must live through this.

*

Day 24: I trip over a small boulder whilst exercising and careen into a wall. Pain ricochets from my shoulder and up my neck. Sliding to the ground, I run my fingertips over my collarbone. It has buckled. Biting my lip, I tuck my arm into my jacket, fashioning it into a makeshift sling.

*

At some point, Robert started leaving messages on forum boards and in “buy, swap and sell” groups. Asking endless questions to people selling car seats and baby capsules: How old is the capsule? Are the buckles bent? Are the attachment points cracked? Does the harness tighten and release?

He’d also broadcast his opinions.

“Looks mouldy as fuck.”

“I can’t see any Australian Standards stickers. Don’t trust this seller.”

“Looks like a death trap—check out the rust. Don’t buy this piece of shit.”

He gets kicked out of groups. An anonymous complaint is lodged with his boss. He is cautioned. My sister figures out that he has created dozens of fake accounts, using names like Louise, Leo and Louie.

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Day 28: Even with gentle nursing, the pain in my shoulder persists, deepening and restricting my movements. The research team suspect that something has gone wrong. They call down at me, requesting updates with increasing urgency. Then even send down a second heart rate monitor for me to wear. I lie quiet and still, picturing the frayed ends of my collarbone stitching themselves together. The pain keeps me awake. It keeps me company.