

Fear and Lightning

Rachel Chalmers

It has been raining a lot recently. Quick thunderstorms and flashfloods ... lightning at night and fear in the afternoon. People are worried about electricity.

'Where shall we go?' he asked. 'Do you mind? I was reading,' she said. 'Shouldn't read in a car,' he said. 'Can't see the horizon. You'll get sick.' She put the book down. 'What was it?' he asked. 'Thompson,' she said, 'not E. P. Hunter S.' 'Why do you read that crap?' he asked. 'Because I'm bored,' she said. 'Where are we going?'

She was unemployed. He had the day off work. The sky was overcast but it was very hot. They had been going out long enough to have a de facto list of places they wanted to visit together; long enough to bicker quite seriously about where they should go; long enough to sulk. Maybe too long, in fact.

She had read in Column 8 that a pink container ship had docked in Botany Bay. She said, 'Let's go and look at the pink ship.' He took some time to digest the idea. Why was the ship pink? What was so special about a pink container ship? But, since there was a large cemetery near La Perouse, he eventually gave in. They'd go up to Bare Island, and if they couldn't see the ship from there, there were vantage points in the cemetery.

He turned right into Anzac Parade. The traffic stretched on for miles. All they could see were gleaming rumps of immobile cars, beige and red and British Racing Green. It was brain-numbing. He was driving a champagne Ford Falcon, wholly inappropriate to his age and station (twenty-six, freelance). There were lime green fluffy dice on the rear vision mirror and a noddy dog in the back window. He was into kitsch, to put it mildly. She couldn't drive. She slumped in the passenger seat, in his line of sight whenever he turned left. He thought she was very beautiful. Her eyes were so deeply set that her eyebrows cast natural shadows on them. She thought she looked like a Neanderthal.

She loved him for his wit, which was considerable; for his kindness, which hadn't been much in evidence lately; and out of habit. They had been very happy together, once, for about a fortnight. Difficult to walk away from a memory like that. She was wired on black coffee, white sugar and anger. She wondered why he couldn't sense the

stillness in the air around her. Ominous. Her blood roared in her arteries and burned in her veins. She wanted to send arcs of lightning crackling from her fingertips. She wanted to shock him. Her skin stuck to the vinyl seat. She hated feeling like a fool. She glared at the endless milk bars and tobacconists, the parking meters, the furniture emporia, the car yards with their brilliant bunting hanging limp over new Toyotas. 'Sydney, bloody Sydney,' she said. 'Isn't it beautiful?' he said. She thought, no.

He came from the Shire, which made her think of hobbits. It is Sutherland Shire but it disdains to specify itself. She came from Warringah Shire which considers itself the Peninsula. You just have to know these things. Inborn. Given the light industry, the proximity of good surfing beaches with regulation Norfolk Island pines and the quarter-acre ambience of each, the Peninsula and the Shire are pretty hard to tell apart. Twin suburban sprawls, mirror images. Sydney might as well be a butterfly painted by a preschooler, a hundred miles on a side; an ink blot for use in an immense Rorschach test.

They tried to meet in the middle, on neutral ground.

There was no sign of the pink ship from La Perouse. They looked at Botany Bay and tried to imagine what on earth Joseph Banks had seen in it. It is vast. It is shallow. It is tremendously ugly, with the modern ugliness of declining industry brutally superimposed on the original ugliness of bleak barren wetlands. Of course, it probably looked better before the main runway from Kingsford-Smith Airport was built straight across it. They lingered to watch a 747 take off. It was a great blunt gunmetal bird. The lifting of it from the tarmac was like a miracle, something you ought to cheer with hearty cheers. She thought, freedom; a grey bird, over the grey water, under the grey sky. He said, 'D' you want to go to the cemetery now?'

There was an old Aboriginal man up near the fort, his close hair pale grey. The old man wore a land rights t-shirt and sold plastic boomerangs. She said, 'Shall we get a boomerang?' He said, 'Let's come back for it.' She said, 'Boom-tish.' The wind had picked up and it snatched their words away. Past the oil refineries in Kurnell, burning off gases from chimneys as high as kites, the southern sky was turning green. 'Southerly buster,' he said. 'I know it's a southerly, buster,' she said.

She thought, ha, ha, ha. We're so funny. They got back in the car. The door cut off the wind as if it were a sausage.

The champagne car nosed its way around the graveyard's periphery. 'When I'm dead,' he said, 'I want you to have me stuffed.' She

yawned. She was feeling lethargic. 'I'm stuffed already,' she said. He glanced at her sharply. She was looking out the window at the Protestant section with its ranks and ranks of graves, its marble plantations. 'Will you still love me when I'm dead?' he asked. 'Of course. Like in that Thurber cartoon,' she said. 'This is Rob, and over there in the glass case is my *first* husband.' 'Yes, but in the cartoon she wasn't dead. Thurber checked with his taxidermist,' he said. He thought to himself, who is Rob?

'Thurber had a taxidermist?' she asked.

He parked the Ford near the arched gate of the Garden of Remembrance. 'My God. Look at that Italianate marble,' she said as they got out. 'It's all too, too Forest Lawn for words.' 'We must find an end to Waugh,' he said. 'We must find an end to Italianate marble,' she said. 'This thing is bigger than both of us.' It was true. They were standing underneath it. Before them low hills tumbled away into the distance, punctuated by headstones. They set off towards a hill with a picnic shelter on it. The soil was unpleasantly crumbly underfoot.

'Please tell me,' she said, 'that these are not sanddunes.' They entertained the image of a thousand Sydneysiders laid to rest under shifting sands. 'How very appetising,' he said. From the picnic shelter there was a clear view across the bay. The pink ship was moored at Kurnell. From this distance all they could make out was that it was a ship, and pink.

'Why is it pink?' he asked. 'Oversight?' 'The company belongs to a woman,' she said. 'She thought it would be fun.' 'Ah,' he said, 'it's one of those feminist things, like liking body fluids.' 'Something like that,' she said. 'Well,' he said. 'A pink ship. There you are. Who would have thought it, eh?'

'Must look very impressive close up,' she said.

He was not looking at the ship any more. He was looking at her. She gazed stonily across the bay. He wanted to kiss her but her controlled stillness was a kind of warning. The only movement in her was the obstinate flutter of her jugular.

'Your heart's beating,' he said. 'You're alive.'

She said nothing. He said, 'Oh my God, she's dead.'

'Let's go,' she said. She set off down the hill. He almost had to run to catch up. 'You don't seem very happy,' he said. 'I wish you wouldn't do that,' she said. 'Do what?' 'Try and make me—I mean, what you're saying is, my reaction to whatever is inappropriate. Well, it's not, 'cause it's mine.' 'I don't understand you sometimes,' he muttered.

He was annoyed. They left the dour Protestant ranks of graves and entered a marble Catholic fantasia. Angels reached down with vials of Christ's mercy. One of the gravestones was signed. 'Union of Grave Diggers,' he read. 'As opposed to the Union of Cheery Diggers.' He folded up one side of his hat, Anzac-style, and affected a ghastly grin.

'My God,' she said. 'Look at this.'

It was a child's grave. Over it the parents had erected a kind of room, with an aluminium frame and glass walls, eight feet high, three feet wide and six feet long. The front was a door. It had a Yale lock. At the back there was a sort of shrine, with a picture of a boy, and his name, Alexander Kotsantonoglou. Some large pale candles burned steadily. There were lush green plants overflowing from hanging baskets. The floor was carpeted a tasteful grey. Alexander had died when he was eight years old. He had been dead for twenty years.

'That's sick,' she said. 'That's so sad. I can't believe it. Somebody's been in there today to light the candles.' 'Why is that sick?' he asked. 'They won't let him be dead,' she said. 'They've built him a little house, look. I bet they keep his bedroom just like he left it. I bet they've come here every week for twenty years just to water the plants. They'll never get over him.'

'Whatever works for them,' he said. He loathed her in her social-worker manifestation.

'It can't be working,' she said bitterly. 'They should be over him by now. They must wake up every morning feeling like he's just died. They can't let him go.'

He tried the door but it was locked. She looked at the picture of the little boy. He had a fat and sullen face. He looked like a nasty child, a liar and a bully, the apple of his mother's eye. She pictured him picking a scab, tormenting a stray kitten.

'Why don't they just let go?' she said.

'Don't be so melodramatic,' he said.

She imagined the car slewing into Alexander's bicycle, the blood on his green velour sweatshirt, his body in its Sunday suit, stiff and unnatural-looking in its small white coffin. The chapel would have been sterile but for the overpowering floral tributes. His mother would have worn rust-black and wept noisily. His father would have seemed silent and stoical, and would have been bewildered. She shuddered.

'You're such a drama queen,' he said.

'They're just delaying the grieving process,' she said savagely. 'What's so terrible about that?' he asked, exasperated. 'Grief is good,'

she said. 'Grief works.'

He thought, but managed, narrowly, to prevent himself from saying, well, you should know.

A drop of rain, broad and warm, struck him on the cheek. 'Weather's changed,' he said, adding in his broadest pseudo-Yorkshire, ' 'tis time we was goin'. It was no longer possible to make out the shape of the pink ship. The wind hurried them off the dunes and into an avenue of pebblecrete mausoleums. Mausolea? she wondered.

'Not so much a necropolis as a suburb of the dead,' he observed. She pulled her jacket around her to keep the rain off, and the cold out, and death at bay, and him. She wanted to be gone. Now wouldn't be soon enough; but the mausolea (mausoleums?) seemed to go on for miles.

Suddenly, somewhere, improbably, a telephone rang. As one they turned to each other and said, in unison,

'It's for you.'