

## Joseph, when it's 3am and I still can't sleep

By Melissa Wan

'IN SAN FRANCISCO everyone wants to be rich. Even we just want to be rich.'

Joseph was growing out his beard, like I always said he should. *I'll look old*, was his counter-argument. *And?* I'd said. *What's so wrong with old?*

I guess now I had to ask myself what was so wrong with rich, if that's what he wanted. Instead I said, 'And where will rich get the planet, Joseph?' but the line was bad, or he was pretending he couldn't hear me. I was otherwise preoccupied with his beard, parts of which flashed silver onscreen, and how it had become a treasure my body ached to find.

The world was in crisis, so people could no longer go out and make money. Now people could no longer go out to make money, the world was in crisis. Where was Marx when you needed him? Locked in libraries across the country. People complained it was getting harder to rouse them from where they'd slumped. Emails arrived daily, sometimes hourly, into inboxes: instruction manuals for how to stay motivated, chain letters, invitations to streamed talks or joint dancing or joint cooking or joint watching TV. The truth was I did not want to be motivated towards anything and I still did not want to do anything with anyone. This morning I unlocked the hopper and poured in fresh coffee beans. I steamed very good oat milk and planned to make my own, when I found the time.

'Find the time?' said Joseph. 'What are you doing with it now?'

'I don't know. What was I ever doing with it?'

He ran his fingers through the hair at his chin and we sat together for a moment. Then he mentioned the German. Jenny's not too crazy about pasta these days, he said. Something about carbs. He was never much of a cook when I was around, but he tells me that she's made him up his game *in favour of equality*. This was the way they had phrased it. I said, *Give me pasta any day*.

'And remember what I told you about your new machine,' I said, 'Always clean it with a soft damp cotton cloth.'

'Yes mother.' He smiled. I was not his mother, but what could I say? I found it difficult to let this man go. Almost as though he *had* been a son and every morning I woke and felt his blood pump through my veins until I couldn't help but think, *Where's Joseph?* Once in a while I found his earlobe pinched, very delicately, between my fingers. But for the most part I'd loosened my grip. After all, he was with the German now. We were all friends; this was the modern world.

Sleep had built a window between us: the eight hours between San Francisco and Manchester. This window was a screen on which, in the supreme privacy of night, I could always find him on one side, and he me on the other.