

San Salvador

By Melissa Wan

If somebody's heart stops due to a trauma, such as a car accident or a fall, CPR cannot save them. I know this, but I don't know if it is the same with cycling. I know you should ask the victim if they're okay and shake their shoulders firmly between two hands. Jerry is on his back, one foot clipped into a pedal, legs across the frame like he's resting. It is hot and sweat drips from the tip of my nose onto his face when I bend over. I shake his shoulders and ask, Are you okay? I repeat it like a mantra, this question in some ways the only question I had ever wanted to ask him but had not.

I think back to our First Aid training when we started with the firm. DO NOT PUT YOURSELF IN DANGER was in capital letters on the handout. I remember nothing after that line, can only think about Jerry watching my breasts as I pushed up and down on a plastic dummy.

I walk away and crouch in a dip by the side of the road. To keep myself safe. Here you can go hours without seeing another person. There is nothing for miles but coal-black roads curving the hills, warm and sticky with sun. There is a cross at the top of a hill in the distance: the monastery of San Salvador. I wonder if it's the kind of place that has nuns. I imagine bleached cotton briefs, white and shiny with abstinence. That life could suit me, waking up and going to sleep with all those other women, pretending to think about god all the time.

We travel a lot for work, me and Jerry. We often travel together. Pulling our cases across a bridge in Paris, the light otherworldly, he stopped to tell me he loved me. The Eiffel Tower grew from the top of his head, from the spot where his hair was thinning, and I said it back. Yes. We're in Paris. I love you too.

He moved in. To do that, he had to leave his wife. He arrived with his life neatly folded in cardboard boxes, squeezed it between the walls of my one-bedroomed apartment, cheek-to-cheek with my own. He leaned his road bike against the bookcase and kept a gathering of empty beer bottles by the door, which he called his 'art installation'. I didn't think he was the kind of man who owned

tweezers, but he was and that was okay. He was messy and disrespectful of my space but I told myself that too was okay.

I look at Jerry on the tarmac with his eyes closed and he seems content, like he's just another part of the landscape. In the hotel room this morning, after he came out of the shower and sat on the edge of the bed, dripping onto the carpet, I warned him about his white jersey but he continued as though I wasn't there. Even I could barely hear my own voice when I tried to explain how hard it would be to get the stains out.

I hear a cyclist go by before I see them. Perhaps I'd fallen asleep. They disappear for a moment before turning around and coming back. It is a man. He is panting, pieces of grit collected in the creases of his forehead and he shouts something to me in German, so I stand and say hello.

He is okay? he asks in English, then swings himself from his bike with athletic precision. This is the kind of man you hope will turn up when you're at a loose end, his blue jersey so bright you can't look at it directly. Now I am standing, my head feels light, and I try to listen to whether or not I am breathing. I look down at my legs and see I am wearing normal socks, the ones with rabbits on. I hadn't expected anyone to see them up close.

He is your husband? the man asks, lifting Jerry's legs off the bike. Jerry looks like he is being difficult to move and a part of me thinks 'typical'. I notice the tape on his left handlebar is torn, revealing slits of silver-white aluminium, and just behind the bike is a gecko, mounted on a rock, his scaled back shimmering blues and greens in the sun. He looks as though he's smiling, so I smile back and I feel relieved I don't have to cycle any further.

Hello, the man says. You are together?

I look at the stranger's face: the wonky nose, pale circles around his eyes where his sunglasses have been and in that instant I remember my Auntie Carol, circular earrings swinging, telling me there is no such thing as lying. She said, There are things as they are and things as we wish them to be.

So I shake my head and I say no. I was cycling behind him when he fell.