

Her Lover's Golden Hair

by [Nike Sulway](#)

She drives up the mountain, the ocean at her back, the night air rushing towards her. The road is winding and narrow and she doesn't give way, doesn't cede the road to the advancing headlights that flash into her eyes. On tight turns she feels the rainforest clutch at their old car, scratching along the paintwork, but the sky is still open above her; she can still see the stars.

Lily's hand is not resting carelessly in her lap. Lily's sandy feet are not up on the dashboard. Lily's salty hair is not blowing into a knotted, lovely mess. Lily is not fiddling with the knobs on the stereo, singing the wrong words off-key, switching stations halfway through songs. She has the whole car to herself, the whole mountain, the whole world. She drives faster, winds down the window, and feels the cold night air bite at her skin.

When she pulls into the yard and opens the rear door, Gilbert barks and leaps from the car, pushing her aside in his eagerness to reach the house. It looks empty, cold, dark. *Good*, she thinks. She watches Gilbert circle the house, barking at the windows and doors. He pushes between her legs when she unlocks the door, almost toppling her across the threshold. She follows him into the kitchen, where he snuffles at the chairs before dashing off again. She hears him searching their little weekend retreat: lounge, study, bathroom, bedroom, the closed-in front porch with its desk and daybed. Lily's shape forever printed in the mattress. Her newspapers still strewn across the floor.

It was habit to come into the kitchen, though she has nothing to do there. She has brought no supplies to unpack, there is no kettle to boil, no meal to make. In her hands are the car keys and a paper bag with Lily's hair curled inside it like a blonde snake.

She puts food in Gilbert's bowl and he comes, reluctantly, and eyes the food without appetite. She senses, again, that he is disappointed in her. His eyes beseech her. *What have you done with her?*

"Stupid dog," she says. "She's dead. Don't you know what dead means?"

He tilts his head, considering. She wants to bury her face in his fur, feel his animal warmth, but instead she opens the back door to let him out. Lily's shoes lean there, waiting. The press of their emptiness horrifies her: the soiled socks shoved carelessly in their throats. Gilbert sniffs at them. *She's here! She's here!* he pants. *Let's go into the forest; let's find her.*

At the end of the garden—beyond the tangled, unkempt rags of mint and woody basil, lettuces gone to seed and tomatoes slumped across the straw—the forest whispers. They used to sit on the step at night, lights out, wine glasses warming in their hands, watching the possums and bush turkeys scramble through the underbrush. The trees, wound in vines, whispered to each other of comfort: of long, strangling embraces. The mountain bulked beneath them. The red soil fed the trees that threw down leaves to rot beneath their feet. The sky was so clear they believed they could see to the end of seasons, the limits of time, watch the stars burn out and die and fall into their open hearts.

She goes inside, closes the door. “Stupid dog,” she says as he follows her into the kitchen.

She gets the wine from the car and pours herself a glass, takes the opened bottle and sits on the couch that is too big for just her and a dog. Gilbert curls at her feet. She can feel him breathing, feel his big soft heart beating against the sole of her foot. The wine swirls inside her, loosening the pain from where it lodges up under her ribs. She pulls strands from the hank of her lover’s hair and idly plaits them into a bracelet that she ties around her wrist.

The pain spreads inside her like a cancer. She cannot breathe, cannot think. Cannot stop thinking. She drinks more and more, hoping to drown the world inside her, knowing it’s hopeless, knowing the world inside her is greater than the world outside.

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In the morning, a faint blue circle has stained her wrist, as if blue is the colour of memory, of death and grief. Fine hairs have lodged themselves in her skin, like the brittle ends of chicken feathers, half-plucked, broken off in her flesh. She scratches at them, idly, as she walks through the house. She finds Gilbert at the back door again, waiting for her. She fills his bowl with water, but there is no food in the house. She pulls a shirt on over her head and slips her feet into Lily’s shoes. “Come on,” she says, clipping the lead onto his collar.

They stop at the supermarket to buy dog food and coffee. She wanders the aisles with a plastic basket on her arm, unable to fill it with anything familiar. They go to the grocer’s and she wanders, aimlessly, among the artichokes and bananas, the nectarines and mangoes. A year ago she and Lily would have been eager for mangoes: would have ordered ahead, keen to taste the first fruit of the season. She would have left her sleeping to come, early and without a hangover, to buy fresh bread, tomatoes, red wine, tart apples, cheese, flowers and mangoes—a whole box of mangoes, waxy and blushing. Last year they ate them in the bath, licking the sticky juice from each other’s chins and throats, laughing, careless. The skins and seeds thrown onto the tiles. A chessboard teetering between them. Captured pieces falling into the foamy water to clink along the enamel. Lily’s breasts had been warm and heavy: Buoyed up by the water, they seemed to rise to meet her hands, the nipples dark and familiar.

She had not known then that death lay hidden within them.

She ties Gilbert up outside the bottle shop. Inside the bottles gleam like hope. No more wine, she swears, but she aches for the bitter slick of a martini, dry and heavy, with an olive glowering in its base. Gin, then, and vermouth. At the counter, the man smiles as he takes her money. “Haven’t seen you in a while,” he says. Smiling, smiling. “How’s Lily?”

Dead, she thinks. Dead and rotting, what the fuck is it to you?

“She isn’t coming.”

“Oh,” he says, putting the bottles into a plastic bag and looking out the door towards Gilbert, slumped on the stoop in the hot air as two children offer him their ice cream. “Next time then, eh? Say hello to her for me.”

“Sure,” she says. “Sure.”

As she turns, the children have given up on the dog and are walking away, ice cream dribbling down the cones and onto their hands. Gilbert does not raise his head to watch them go.

A car rushes by in the street.

To avoid the thought of never kissing Lily again, she tries to remember the goodbye she didn't, at the time, recognise as a final farewell: a rapid, see-you-later glancing of their lips. Lily's mouth was dry, a little fevered, but she looked as she had looked the day before; there was nothing to mark the change that had transpired inside her. Her friends were waiting for her in the car outside, the motor idling. The ocean waited in their salt-bleached hair. Just one day away from the smell of antiseptic and morphine, from the sight of her lover's veins, swollen and bruised as a junkie's, her once-long, thick hair grown brittle and thin, clumping in the bathroom sink. One day in the curative abrasions of suck and sand, swell and salt. A quick kiss, then—a peck—and when the horn beeped behind her she smiled, chucked her lover under the chin, and ran down the stairs. She tries to remember another farewell—insists on another last kiss, more loving, more true. She imagines herself touching her lover's mouth with her thumb, rubbing back and forth against soft, familiar, dented flesh before she leans in and kisses her—softly, tenderly, forever. She holds on tight, feeling the weather of death blow over them, through them, as they think the same thoughts, wish the same wish, learn to let go.

She does not think of driving home from the ocean, of waving goodbye to her friends and turning to the dark house. Going inside. She will not remember her lover's body heavy against the bathroom door, or the blood—already darkening—that seeped across the tiles and stained the grout. She does not think of the thief Lily had become, of the regret and guilt she felt. The fury she felt. The hopeless, helpless anger. She will not think of Lily meeting death on her own terms, in her own time. She will not think of Lily standing on the top step, waving goodbye with the blade concealed in her pocket. Lily smiling as she waved. Deceiving her, letting her go. She will not think of Lily turning to go inside after she is gone. Filling Gilbert's bowl with food, making sure he is okay before locking herself in the bathroom and sitting on the floor of the shower, running warm water over her wrists to soften them. She will not think of her lover's hands—those hands that had both held and hurt her—pushing the blade into her own wrists and waiting, alone, for time to pass.

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Back at the house she pours a martini into a cheap glass. She takes her lover's hair out of its paper bag and winds the slim plait around her wrist. It barely reaches to her elbow, the frayed end tickling the crook of her arm. The blue bruise beneath her hair bracelet has darkened, deepened. The hairs embedded in her arm have burrowed deeper into her skin, thickened, grown feathered. She pulls at them, absently, with her fingernails and then with tweezers, but they won't come out. They are part of her now.

She unwraps the plait, places it on the table. She resists the urge to bring the hair to her face, to swallow the smell in greedy gulps. Lily used to smell of almonds. Warm almonds.

There's a loud, rattling thump against the kitchen window. When she looks up, startled, she sees a bird—brightly-coloured, unfamiliar—wheeling about a few metres away from the window to hurtle, again, at the glass. Gilbert comes into the room behind her, curious, and

barks at the bird as it hurls wings and body, beak and claws against the glass. She reaches up and unlatches the window, watches the bird wheel again as she pushes it open. Does it hesitate? It seems to hover in the middle of its turn, peering into the room behind her. As it dives, she steps aside, watches it come through the window and onto the table, and it picks up Lily's hair in its claws. It pecks at the rosy gold. It turns, cocks its bright head, the strands crimped in its beak, and flutters its wings. When she reaches out a hand to grasp at it, the bird rises, swerves around her, and flies out the window, across the garden and into the forest.

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She dreams of a tower within which time has stopped. It is wrapped in storms and creeper vines, the stones damp with humidity, warm and heavy and grey. The tower recedes over her head amid gravid, ancient fig trees with buttressed roots. The earth is dark: crumbling and pliant beneath her bare feet. The soft rot of time clutches at her ankles. She circles the tower, again and again, knowing there is no entrance. She pushes at the stones until her hands are red and bloody, nails torn from her fingertips, her cheeks damp with tears and blood and soil. The bird whips past her. The long rope of Lily's hair dangles from its claws, trails over her shoulder in the old, familiar way. Blue feathers push through her wrists, pinion out into the half-light.

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When she wakes, the house is so quiet she can hear the ambient electric hum: the refrigerator cycling, the stove's clock marking time. She wanders barefoot, bare-breasted, into the garden and wrenches the fuses from the fusebox, one by one, feels the satisfying ceramic scratch as they fall on the concrete path at her feet.

Back in her bed, the darkness thickens like soup. She quiets her breathing, burrows beneath the sheets, and presses her hands to her ears. Outside, the forest breathes carbon, oxygen. She falls back into the dream: the tower, the gravid figs, the bird, her lover's hair. The feathers at her wrists throb like an old wound as she presses weightlessly against the stones.

She wakes with angry tears: Soil stains the sheets, the bruise on her wrist is buried beneath feathers, blue and bright. When she lifts her arm—her *wing*—the fingers beneath the dense colour seem boneless, filled with light. And in her chest, too, there is a new hollowness, as if the spaces inside her have expanded.

The bird is perched in her bedroom window. Outside it is barely light. The trees are hazy, blue-black ghosts of their daylight selves. The bird peers at her. She pushes back her hair, a headache already pounding in her temples, nausea nestled firmly in her throat and belly. The glass on her bedside table is still half-full. An oily film on its surface dotted with drowned mosquitoes. Her skin and sheets reek of stale sweat, alcohol and red, friable soil. The bird hops across the sill and flutters onto the table, its claws clicking quietly against the dusty timber.

“Shoo,” she says, flapping her wing as it hops closer.

The bird lifts into the air and circles the room. It dives towards the end of the bed, to the quilt and sheets she has kicked to the floor. She hears the scritch and scatter of its claws and reaches under her pillow, searching. The bird rises over the end of the bed, gold threads

gleaming in its beak. She sits up suddenly, light-headed and furious. “Bitch,” she says, “give it back. It’s mine. Fucking bird: Give it back.”

The bird swerves around her head; she feels a soft caress as it brushes her temple—the animal frailty and warmth of its body a soft, penetrative shock—before it lunges past her, out the window.

“Gilbert!” she calls, though when he enters the room she cannot imagine why she has called him. “That bird,” she says. “That fucking bird took her hair.”

Gilbert eyes her, waiting for something he can respond to, something he understands. She reaches out her wing and he comes closer. If she were still human he would have rubbed his body against her calves. She bends over to retrieve the remains of Lily’s hair and finds almost nothing—a handful of strands scattered across the mess of sheets. She lowers herself onto the floor, Gilbert panting beside her, and lifts the blankets, peers under the bed. “Fuck,” she mutters, brushing her feathers through the dust, raising swirls of dirt among the old boots and forgotten newspapers.

She hears a soft rustle at the open window, Gilbert’s curious snort. The bird is there again, peering at her. Waiting.

“What have you done with it?” she says.

The bird hops up and down, peering at the thin scatter of gold clutched in her claw. She tightens her fist. Hot tears seep from her dark eyes. “Why?” she says.

The bird hops closer, onto the floor beside her. It presses its tiny head against her feathers. She feels the pinch of its beak as it pulls at the hair bracelet, still tied about her wing. It worries at the knots until it is undone. The bird sits with the tiny plait in its beak, watching her with black-eyed certainty, before fluttering out the window and into the soft, blue air.

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She follows the bird down the old track, barely visible between the press of dangling roots, banyan trees, and silky oaks. It is dark, heavy with quiet and damp. Walker canes whip against her shins as she presses past them, their prickly spines lacerating her skin. Dead leaves shush her as she passes. She has left her shoes beside Lily’s on the back step, leaning quietly together. Her feet, with their sharp claws, no longer fit inside them. The back door is open, the light at the top of the stairs turned on. Ahead of her the bird flies, landing on branches thick with greenery to wait for her. She feels her heart lift towards it. In the falling light it seems only half real: a thing made of air and light.

When the track turns she lifts into the air to follow the bird. She feels her moist, hollow bones tremble with effort, as if they are wet lungs inhaling their first burning breaths, as she folds her claws beneath her body and pushes willfully into the sky. The light falls through her as she rises. Ahead is the tree, the storm, the tower. At the tower’s peak a bright nest: a tangle of golden hair. She peers into the soft, down-lined bowl at her lover’s beating heart.

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Gilbert pads about the house, his claws scratching on the wooden floors, his fur coating the furniture. There is no one left to care what he does, to scold him for chewing at the chair legs, or shitting on the rug. He cannot count the days—she threw away the clocks and calendars before she went. It was forbidden, it seemed, to utter the names of days and months, to speak of now and then, today and yesterday. Words must drop like stones from her mouth without forming sentences, without beginning or end, lest time creep in and learn, again, to pass.

When she returned she would not speak, or think, because the deathly arrangement of noun and verb, premise and conclusion, marked a progression that invited yet another end. The seasons she left behind her at the shore, at the ocean. Up here there was only heat and damp, the suck and sap of lucent chlorophyll.

The measured substance that pushes the world this way and that, the invented sequence that hovers between the simple raising and lowering of a glass, could no longer be tolerated. She would not heed the relentless push of time.

She nailed the windows shut: blocked the temporal movement of the sun and stars from her view. The rhythmic pulsation of light suggested, it seems, the unstoppable equation that attaches to mass and energy. She lived in the dark, blindfolded. She wrapped bandages around her head. Became a thickened, muffled creature. Her ears were covered for fear of hearing rainfall, or leaves snap from their moorings and tumble, the owl hooting its signature on the night sky. She burned her hands on the stove, forced each tip and palm into the flame until all trace of whorl and crease were gone.

She had overlooked her heart, her poor, beating heart. Like a mindless machine it continued to beat inside her, to add and subtract the path of days, of memory, of distance. A whimsical toy, it beeped and sighed, singing and songing along the jointed channels of her blood. Counting, counting. Now diminishing. Now expanding. Now sinking. Now swelling. Insisting on its literal dance. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Filling up with deadly arithmetic. For all her quietude, her sinking into silence, it only beat more loudly. Louder. Louder. Booming in the dark. Pushing blood and grief and forgetfulness through her veins.

We wasted time, she said to Gilbert as she went away, following the strands of her lover's hair, following the bird who came to her window, who plucked at her skin like a death-eater. *We wasted so much time.*