

Landmark

Jessica Lim

We are just barely three weeks into life with a high school student. ‘It’s all happening!’ I quip to people who stop me — at the IGA, at the local post office — to ask how she’s going. It seems the easiest way to be both honest and non-committal. How is she going? It’s been eleven days; I don’t know. But also, I do. She is definitely *going*; she is on her way. Overnight, there were changes. She wants to wear her hair out. She enjoys catching the bus. Her mood is more changeable. She’s had boys try to show her things she doesn’t want to see (she told them to piss off — also new); she’s seen a vape. Teachers don’t automatically treat her like a good kid; everybody is guilty until proven innocent. I’m starting my second year of a Masters of Teaching; on my first practicum the supervising teacher warned me not to smile at my year nines. Considering the only concern my daughter had before I started prac was that I’d accidentally call a hulking teenager ‘bub,’ the not-smiling seems improbable. How big, the suddenly appearing pond of high school, when you’ve been carried in a womb for twelve years.

#

Ours is a small town. A bit of land triangulated by three mountains — Pinbarren, Cooroora, Cooran. There is a main street, a village post office, a primary school, a brewery, a restaurant. A sister-town seven minutes’ drive away. The mountains lie inland from an ocean — the Pacific, Magellan’s ‘Peaceful Sea’. I don’t know what the peoples of Oceania called the Pacific in prehistory, or if its reputation was always calm. That’s the thing about labels — once given they tend to stick, and the latest iteration of something easily replaces an earlier version. High school, the parenting books say (as if we need reminding): the time for making yourself a new label.

When we moved here, she was in grade three. A deciding factor in the choice of house was the ability to walk to the local primary school — down our road, onto the main drag, then left into the street the school is on. It is a simple but not short route, about a kilometre. Crossing the bridge, we’d stop and peer at the water down below, the indiscriminate colour of aged oil paintings. In summer the return trip had to end with iceblocks or there’d be a revolt.

I used to imagine we left a trail of sweat on the sidewalk, like snails, as we wended our way home.

#

I am going into this ‘parent of a big kid’ thing with my eyes wide open and my heart steeled. I went to a rough state high school and told my parents almost nothing. She has talked to me about skirt lengths, the teacher who roused on her, the boy who tried to shove his laptop in her face, that she said piss off, the vape found on the oval, the teacher who showed them a video that made her feel uncomfortable. High school is having every word that comes out of her mouth trip the parenting fire alarms in my head, and having to manually turn them off saying, *false alarm, well isn't it great these things work. When there's a real fire hopefully I'll know about it.*

#

On the twelfth day of high school the rain starts. Here in the hinterland rain is part of the scenery, but even more so this La Niña summer. Overnight it does not *fall*, it is shot like *bullets*. I compulsively check windows; lie in bed unable to sleep due to the shelling. 320mls, they say the next morning. A one-in-one-hundred-year flood. Overnight there have been changes: animals are displaced, news crews have come, the town is cut in half. We walk the old route to the primary school to assess the damage but have to stop long before the bridge — the oil-colour cobra has left its basket and flattened itself over everything.

‘Gosh, she’s getting tall,’ a neighbour says, looking at my almost-teenager and her go-go-gadget-legs as they wade in the suddenly-appeared lake. ‘She was so little when you first came here.’

I try to see the other end of the water, the other side of town, but cannot. Somewhere underneath all this, I think, are the landmarks we know so well, her and I. The path we’ve walked together a hundred times. When the water recedes, I am hopeful our silvery snail trails will still be there. I am hopeful.

Jessica Lim has a Bachelor of Journalism from the University of Queensland, and her nonfiction has been published in Scum literary magazine and is forthcoming in Island. She lives in the Sunshine Coast hinterland with her husband and three daughters.