

Impermanence

Naomi Egan

The first thing Carmen noticed about San Francisco was the air. To her, it tasted like inhaling a cigarette for the first time- the unexpected chalkiness, how it coated your tongue and slipped down your oesophagus. The way that it took a few heaves to regulate your breathing again; the aftertaste like licking a gutter. Maybe city air always took a few hits to get used to; it was the difference between liquor and fruit juice, chili flakes and orange wedges, between San Fran and the Philippines.

To Carmen, things didn't feel electric here so much as they did mechanical. The pavement seemed to shake under her plimsolls, in tandem with the rattling cacophony of furtive subway trains as they clattered through the cities arteries; she could almost detect a pulse in the air, that shook the concrete with every bass-boosted throb. No one walked here, she noted; they strutted, or skated, or jogged, or glided- not in an angelic way, like the waitresses back on the coast- but almost as if their ribs would shatter if they swung their hips anymore.

In the villages of Banaue, the air was sickly and sultry- summers were long and radiant, and winters were sympathetic. It felt, at times, as though you were both in the middle of the universe and dangling off the precipice of it- the heatstroke and citrus seasons were all Carmen had ever known, and whilst everything she identified with converged in this one spot; every person, prospect and plan seemed to shoo her away from this quicksand town, diverging like opposite ends of a magnet. It wasn't that she was agitated, so much as restless- Banaue would have been interesting to someone who wasn't so invested in the odd cocktail of telenovelas and stories about the American Dream that Carmen was brought up with. People here spoke fast and with feeling, as though their tongues were on fire and would burn up if they didn't talk. In San Francisco, people didn't burn up so much as burn out; the exhaustive wheeze of drones and ceiling fans and telephone cold callers kept the city labouring incessantly through the small hours of day into white-sun mornings, and with air so dry, so filtered that you woke up needing a lozenge. Confined to a studio apartment on the 18th floor of what some would call the most lifeless high rise on the east coast, Carmen spent her mornings pacing with the tattered pages of a document so mercilessly annotated and highlighted it almost weighed more. Her boss was a small, iron-fist kind of man- who ran his dingy laundry service like it was a cruise ship- and it was with reluctance so obvious it stung that he printed the copy of the script Carmen clutched in her hands that morning.

Wrenching on the ceiling fan string with a practiced strength, she closed her eyes against the feeble whirlwind of recycled air. Beads of sweat coagulated on her nose and hung like condensation on her upper lip; the humidity, the choking closeness of a hot city in the summertime was an unexpected obstacle Carmen quickly became acquainted with the immigration. In the months she had lived in the high-rise she was still unfamiliar with the feeling; she woke with the unsatiated expectance of unpolluted, rich Asian air on her tongue, and was met instead with a dust that seemed to settle about her lungs.

Every day seemed to start and end the same; a cold breakfast, a sleepy subway at 6:30, a soul-killing shift at the laundromat, and falling asleep to reruns of Friends on the sofa. Today, however, was different. She didn't need to be at the audition until 11, but forced herself out of bed at 5, omitting her usual routine of cereal and a glass of water to try and hold onto the "morning-skinny" – that was another thing Carmen has come to understand- your relevance at an audition was indirectly proportional to the size of your waist. Running impatient fingers through her long, heat-baked hair, she caught sight of herself in the mirror that was propped against the wall at her feet. She felt an ache somewhere in her abdomen as she turned, surveying the apartment that she

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returned to everyday after work. There was this tangible sense of impermanence to the place- maybe it was the cupboards that were never more than half-full, or the blinds that clashed with the sofa, or the fraying makeup bag that lay discarded on the cracked sink. She had never really expected to stay here for more than a month, but as the days wore mercilessly on, dragging longer and longer until an 8 hour shift at the laundry place stretched onto time immemorial, she began to question whether America really could offer her the life she sought. After all, the people whose faces she came to be familiar with didn't seem to hold much hope for any joy in the future. Her boss, Greg, seemed to have desperation and debilitation etched into the sagging lines of his face; he grasped at the air as he talked, clenching his fingers around nothingness as if he could see some intangible prospect of fortune or joy in front of him- just out of reach of his yellowing fingertips. At night the walls around her bed were alive with the throaty shouts of her Hispanic neighbour and his uncaring children- the naivety she brought with her on the flight from the Philippines to America, in the hope of seeking out some kind of "found family" there, was at its most devastatingly obvious when she could hear these cries. Nevertheless, there was a feeling in the air this morning, she thought. Not luck, or good fortune, but the promise of potential. Something seemed to buzz around the sun-blocked downtown streets this morning, that told her to keep alert, and open.

The nearest subway tunnel to Carmens "home" was a few blocks walk away, and whilst the commute was usually a mix of crushing boredom and terror for her life, the grimy back alleys and graffitied shutters didn't seem quite so depressive this morning. Maybe it was the heat, or the sundress, or the jittery kind of nerves that seemed to fill up her throat and tickle her eyelashes that were always present on audition days. In her peripheries there were cigarette butts, dusty film on cracked windows, skinny dogs and 12 year olds with tattooed faces; but ahead there was sunlight, and a city that had space for her- would *make* space for her, if it was the last thing she did.

The hot, balmy air of the subway station was overwhelming in its presence. The place felt invasive, like a personal attack on her senses; the guttural spit of overheated engines, the weak smell of urine and alcohol- it felt as though San Francisco itself was launching some kind of deterrent at her. The ticket vendor scrunched his wet nose and narrowed his piggy eyes at the mound of change she placed on his countertop, and seemed unwilling to give her her ticket, but she returned his disdain with a smile and left the begrudging presence far behind her.

To occupy her wandering thoughts she scrolled aimlessly through her phone, doing her best to ignore the incessant texts from her mother. Irena, whilst supportive of her daughters determination and goals, was regrettably missing Carmen more than she cared to admit (and she admitted a lot). It seemed as though Irena had stolen any care or attachment her husband might have shown towards their daughter for herself, so she was left with a mother so overbearing it was almost parasitic, and a father so absent from her life that he may as well have been catatonic. As the subway train trundled through the teeming underbelly of the cities bumbling Underground, Carmen found herself wondering what she had in common with the people around her. Who speaks English fluently, so much so that they could pass as American? Who speaks Tagalog? Who came here by choice, and who was dragged here by an outside force? Was she?

The train journey seem to go on for years as she contemplated the people around her- why none of them would make eye contact with her. What brought them to this carriage, in this late morning- what choices did they make in their past that lead them here, now? Still none of them would meet her eyes, and she found herself again thinking of the mirror at home, of the half-full cupboards. Although her heart was picking up speed, she felt oddly calm and at peace- it was as though she was fretting over a choice that had already been made for her, the moment she got on the plane.

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After disembarking the gritty carriage, Carmen caught sight of herself in the spotless window of an artisan coffee shop. The girls were white. A few were black. Their hair was clipped and chic, their clothes so urban they almost camouflaged into the whitewashed industrialism that made up this part of town. They must have had ribs removed to get waists so small. She could almost smell them as they flit about, otherworldly, behind that glass screen- never fully extending their legs or fingers, as they walked. She could smell the coffee in their manicured hands, the fabric conditioner on their neatly pressed blouses; she could hear the thoughts of the men in the corner when they caught wind of the delicate perfume or the hairspray that kept their curls aloft. Some had eyebrows that were bleached, and pink mascara that transformed them into faeries or elves. It made Carmen think of running for the bus to get to work on time and watching it pull away from the station, or highlighting words on a script that seemed to mean something but didn't really. It reminded her of looking for art in thrift shops to prop on the floor of a studio apartment, in a high rise that seemed to only exist in limbo, or taking crumbly mascara off of weary eyes just to reapply it the next day until the tube ran out. It felt like running a marathon you didn't train for, or a small, cantankerous man who was always grasping at something he could never quite reach, with yellowing fingers, in a laundromat.

Carmen closed down the map open on her phone, and turned left, away from the high street. She had passed this place on her way to work and she knew that the inhabitants were untruthful people if you didn't know any better, but she was sure of what she would ask of them, and wouldn't leave without it. Each picture plastered on the windows blocked more light from the people inside, and promised the buyer the American dream, the French dream, the British, Spanish, Hawaiian dream.

One small poster tucked in the corner spoke out loud to her as she crossed the threshold, and sat in front of a suited white man, who only spoke English.

"Hello" she sounded out. "I saw the poster on the window. When is the next flight to the Philippines?"