

LIVING SMALL

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THE SEVEN-FOUR-SIX BUS MOVED AHEAD like a fat snake through the city's main streets. Stopping abruptly, it twisted left toward the curb, swelling with office workers, lawyers, tourists, and students. The engine charged as the bus veered right to join the line of traffic, slowly winding its way through to the outer suburbs.

It was hot and sticky; the urge to pull open a window weighed against the smell of exhaust fumes that would pour in. Luisa sat at the very back, sandwiched between a teenage boy, his head tilting back and forth as though loosely attached, music blasting into his ears from headphones, and a neatly dressed woman carrying a large bouquet of wilted red roses.

Along the outskirts of the city, students and business suits alighted, Luisa remembering when she and Ielu lived here in her grandparents' villa after they were married. It was like most houses in this neighbourhood then, teeming with large families and friends, the comings and goings observed from verandas.

There was ma Isa, cousin Tupu, and his wife Serena, Uncle Gerhart and his wife Celia, and the young girls Veronica and little Luana, who went to the Catholic girls' school nearby returning home on the weekends.

She missed the sounds of the old house and the feeling of being enveloped by people. They threw a party the summer she graduated from university, the house flowing with music, family, neighbors, and a few classmates. Her grandmother's speech was unexpected. Clutching her eldest son Gerhart's arm for balance, Isa stood from her armchair, her short stature prominent amidst the tall figures crowding around. Waiting for the room to fill with

silence, Isa's index finger nestled against the tiny groove above her top lip to shush everyone. Her voice trembled slightly from age. "Luisa," she began, her head shaking slowly from side to side, "She's a dreamer."

She told of the past few years when she had come across her granddaughter alone at the kitchen table in the middle of the night, surrounded by piles of books and paper. First, she decided Luisa must be suffering from an illness of the mind, which came maybe from her late husband Joseph's side, a madness eating away in here, she said pointing to her head. But as time wore on she found herself waking routinely at night, drawn to the quiet activity in the kitchen. She sat up with Luisa, out of concern she told herself, but there were questions that begged asking. What was so important to keep her awake during the night; why couldn't it wait till the morning?

Grandmother and granddaughter, both armed with hot mugs of tea soon resembled student and teacher. The nights running into weeks and months, light discussions built toward arguments. Luisa argued that dead philosophers' visions helped create modern civilization, while Isa simply argued that the daily toil of human beings had trudged them to this very day with the help of God.

"My granddaughter has courage, the courage to make a path and follow her dream. I think maybe that comes from my side of the family."

There was a chorus of laughter and the raising of glasses as they toasted Luisa. Ielu had squeezed her hand, only making her cry more.

"Where'd you get to?"

Stepping out from behind the crowd of standing passengers was a woman from work. So far they had only waved in passing, Luisa struggling to match the new names and faces. She shuffled close to the window as the young woman with curly hair filled the seat next to her, her bare solid arms overlapping toward Luisa's thin limbs. The proximity gave them the appearance of close friends.

"You had that far away look on your face, like you were daydreaming."

Luisa laughed, her weariness receding as she turned to face her coworker. "It's that place, makes you brain dead," she responded kindly.

"You don't have to tell me. So . . . what's a lady like you doing there?"

Luisa swallowed hard, recalling the manager, a dumpy woman reeking of a floral deodorant that barely disguised her persistent perspiration. She had made small talk peering over Luisa's shoulder while she filled in her personal details.

"Don't worry," the manager said reading her expression. "It's just talk, that's all. You'll be OK love."

They rode along for a few moments in silence, Luisa sensing her companion's eagerness to talk.

"It's Luisa, eh? That's pretty. Everyone calls me Bar. You wanna know how I ended up at Emcet?"

Luisa nodded, sunk back into the seat's vinyl cushioning feeling the heaviness of exhaustion. At 5:30 a.m., she'd risen to make lunches for the children, pouring bowls of cornflakes, gathering clothes into piles, and searching under beds and chairs for separated shoes. In the bathroom, she lined everyone's toothbrushes along the vanity top, a spread of paste on each. She felt like a ghost mother, knowing Ielu wouldn't wake them for another two hours. She rushed over notes, dressing casually in jeans and one of Ielu's shirts tied around the waist, then set out for the bus stop across the street to head into the city.

By 7:00 a.m., she was standing by a white board teaching foreigners to speak English with a Kiwi twang. Luisa abandoned the text books for clippings from the morning newspaper. Her students were mostly male and mesmerized reading aloud from the sports pages, the older Asian businessmen willing to read the golfing articles several times over.

By midday, she was glad to be alone with an hour to kill, before walking up the hill to the university. She missed the last lecture of the day, her decision to stretch out across the benches ending in sleep. She was roused by other students trying to get past, waking awkwardly to catch herself lightly snoring, her mind racing ahead to her 3:30 p.m. shift. Emcet was a fifteen-minute walk up through the domain, Luisa arriving with her lungs bursting.

The hydraulic squish of brakes brought her back to Bar's voice in midsentence; the bus stopped for passengers.

"So you see, it's so me. I figure I'm an expert on human behavior. I've always wanted to do social work. Here's to those crazy lonely bastards we're paid to talk to all day."

The few remaining passengers were staring, Bar's voice carrying the length of the bus.

"You can add the people there as well . . . that supervisor," Luisa said referring to the woman who occupied the cubicle next to her. Although Luisa had only observed the tip of her blonde head, she'd become familiar with her honey-toned voice in the past fortnight, running at full speed building to a high crescendo.

"She's outrageous, her mouth, I've never come across . . .," Luisa faltered, embarrassed although not exactly sure for whom. Bar came to her rescue.

"Come across a dominatrix? Oh yeah. She's played that stupid twat for almost two years."

Luisa's jaw dropped.

"You should see your face," Bar laughed. The urge was too great; Luisa joined in, laughing like an overly excited schoolgirl.

Bar looked beyond her, past the window, reaching across to ring the bell, a blanket of giggling hysteria covering them. She got up and stepped out of the bus doors, her fleshly figure moving elegantly in a black lycra dress.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Luisa called out, still grinning. Bar waved from the pavement, her smile transforming her plain face. Luisa watched as she walked toward a small cream stucco house surrounded by Pohutakawa trees that were just beginning to flower.

Telu came into view minutes later as Luisa's bus pulled into their street. He was standing outside by the front of their house in a misshapen hat attacking the weeds surrounding the letterbox. She could tell he was upset by the way he grabbed furiously at the green shoots.

"Baby," he sighed. "Your kids are driving me crazy."

"My kids now?" Luisa laughed at her husband.

He explained that Ant had woken crying for her, searching the house, inconsolable until Louise the eldest promised to take him to the park after school. Jeff couldn't find his homework. Tino refused to take his antibiotics. And he had to bribe Stevie to shower.

"You want a cuppa?" Luisa asked escaping indoors.

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"Ooh, I just love your hair," came a voice through the cubicle wall.

Luisa checked her watch, only a few minutes till the shift finished. She was finally getting into the swing of things or so she thought, gathering her books, shifting her bag next to her, ready to leave on the hour.

"Shut the fuck up, you talk when I tell you to."

A mixture of warmth and uneasiness arose in Luisa as she scanned the plain walls dotted with instructional posters

"A ringing phone should be answered in three rings."

"Never leave your phone alone; that call is paying your wage."

"Speak clearly with a smile; always leave the caller wanting more."

"They're not going to help you any. Hi, I'm Robyn." It was the voice from next door. "I was talking to you before. Your hair, it's gorgeous, I've always wanted long curls."

The introduction hung in midair, Luisa unprepared for Robyn's girth stretching across the door frame like a lumpy mattress hanging over a bed. She wore a baby doll blue dress, layers of flesh running into crevices. Luisa cringed as she forced herself up from her seat. Robyn's modest but large

image was far from the mental picture she had painted over the past few weeks. Luisa had wrongly assumed anyone so blatantly immoral like Robyn would have the physical features that commanded instant attention. She wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or silly.

"Thank you," she finally stammered, Luisa's arm stretching forward to shake Robyn's tiny hand. "Your hair, it's . . . lovely," she returned the compliment.

The large woman beckoned to Luisa, folding her arm into her own as they joined the shift of women preparing to leave.

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Ielu accused Luisa of being too serious, they'd met at a mid-Christmas dinner late one evening, in a Malaysian restaurant in the upper back streets of the city. Luisa was tipsy, talking across the table at her girlfriends about the arts degree she planned to start the next year. Coming from a large family she said politics was a natural choice, the years of constant negotiation.

"We were good Catholics, fish and chips every Friday night, no big deal," her wrists making sweeping gestures in the air.

"Ugh, uh. Wrong," she answered herself. "If I went to get the tomato sauce, it was all over. By the time I came back from the kitchen, my brothers had eaten everything."

Her friends were enjoying Luisa.

"You had to present your argument, why everyone should have a turn. See, see . . . politics," she needled away like an excited schoolgirl. There was a small round of applause, Luisa rising to take a bow.

Ielu made his move. "I think you're missing the point," he butted in, placing his drink on the table and taking the chair next to Luisa. "It's convincing them they didn't need sauce."

She turned quickly, her nostrils flaring, preparing to confront the stranger. Facing him she saw the daring in his eyes and the smile behind them. It was true.

Luisa looked for meaning in every aspect of her life. When the dirty laundry piled up, she believed their life had too much clutter. No mail for several days meant they were spiritually stranded. Any plumbing problems reflected their own blockages brought about by outstanding debts and unfulfilled promises. She cried the weekend the toilet became blocked, apologizing to the plumber for calling him out, remaining with him while he stabbed inside the bowl with a long steel pipe, like a madman fishing.

"I can't blame anyone else . . . you told me not to rush in . . ." Luisa began.

Ielu was busy in the kitchen trying to prepare a meal while their youngest, Ant, drove toy trucks around his feet. “Baby let it go. Who even cares?” He guessed there was more to her tears than the overflowing sewage.

“I’m trying to finish this chapter on social change—instead I keep seeing these freaks sitting at home, one hand on the phone and the other on their . . .”

“Jesus,” Ielu stepped out from the kitchen careful not to trip over the toys parked in the doorway, raising a wooden spatula high in protest. “We’ve been through worse.”

Luisa’s studies had cost them, unable to fit full-time work around such a busy schedule. At first they appeared shipshape, but as time went by, they paid bills only when services were threatened. When a notice arrived warning of their car’s pending repossession, Luisa waded into their financial nightmare. They were relieved when the first offers of extra work came her way. Luisa was shaking her head.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” he kept on. “Those bimbos are filling your head with mush.”

“It’s not like that. Once you get to know them, it’s different,” Luisa argued.

Ielu went back to the haven of his stove. He loved cooking and preferred it to most of the tasks around the house, grateful that his wife was busy elsewhere.

“I’m part of that world, even though I feel like a tourist, and the work . . . well, think of the material,” Luisa added.

Ielu came out and hugged her. He kissed her forehead while she poured over her thesis on the computer screen.

“Why am I doing this?” She asked out loud.

He walked back to the stove top adding slices of beef to the dish, the pan smoking with the introduction of the new ingredients.

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The summer sky was clear, dusk still several hours away as the small group of women began emerging from the lift of the basement office. It was just after 6:00 p.m., Luisa’s wispy figure trailing behind the single file cutting a path down the narrow side streets out to the main road. She blinked hard, her eyes adjusting to the natural daylight, relieved to be at the end of another tiresome day.

Luisa enjoyed hanging back. It gave her the chance to examine the shapes and postures of the others; and besides, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to be seen out with them. She checked her reflection in the bold shop fronts they were passing, searching for any noticeable similarities with the women who were now separating into motorists and bus passengers.

“I mean I’ve read about it, but I wouldn’t know how to clear my mind, I’ve always got stuff going on.”

Robyn’s latest quest for losing weight was meditation; she had been canvassing her coworkers on the subject. Luisa felt inside her bag for coins along the groove of the bottom edges, wishing she had driven. They reached the bus stop. She checked over her shoulder watching for the seven-four-six.

“And then you’ve got to chant, like mom, mom. You ever done that, meditate?” Robyn called back to Luisa.

Luisa recalled the meditation group, the early evenings spent chanting. The moments she would open one eye and check the group, feeling almost foolish to find everyone still, like sleeping bullfrogs, herself unsure.

“No,” she replied.

Although the bus shelter was empty Luisa knew better than to take a seat. She had quickly noticed the natural hierarchy among her workmates. The women arranged themselves in order of service. The two eldest, both nearing their late sixties had been with the company for most of its four years. They were the first to take seats on the long smooth aluminium bench. Robyn simply left no room for the others.

Watching the two elders, Luisa couldn’t help thinking of her old aunties. Sheila, who was fond of passing photos of her grandchildren around the lunchroom, was unremarkable in a crowd, plain and straight as an arrow. Luisa had warmed to her instantly. And energetic Jean, widowed twice, flirted at every opportunity, saying it kept her young. Callers sent gifts to the pair regularly in the vain hope of meeting them.

She heard the roar of the bus as it appeared at the top of the hill, but it was a car horn that made her look across the street.

“They’re coming to training,” her husband yelled across the traffic.

“We going football,” Ant and Stevie sang out to their mother. “You coming?”

Luisa dashed over shaking her head, careful of the vehicles whizzing past. She reached in the back, her hand brushing the heads of her babies.

“Mummy’s gonna take the bus,” she told her family. “It’s been a long day and watching a bunch of old men pretending they’re still boys doesn’t compare with a nice cup of tea and putting my feet up.”

Ielu laughed watching his wife as she sprinted back to the bus stop.

She had to work her way to the rear of the bus hopeful of a seat, the driver cramming the passengers in so tightly they didn’t need to hold onto the overhead handles to keep their balance. There was still a queue of people when the bus doors closed. As they started to pull away Sheila and Jean emerged from the stranded group yelling frantically at the driver. He pleaded his

passenger limit was full. In return, they banged against the door, their large bags battering against the window. People were laughing.

The driver's apologetic tone soured as they hurled a battery of obscenities against him. "You ladies ought to act your age."

Luisa's embarrassment rose as Sheila ran onto the road chasing after the bus, her upturned finger proudly displayed, her hair hanging over her eyes so that she appeared faceless. There was a break in the traffic and the bus lurched forward. Sheila grew smaller as they advanced up the street.

Luisa felt badly that she'd said nothing but changed her mind on hearing some of the passengers laughing about her workmates. A feeling of dread ran down her spine landing heavy in the pit of her stomach. Suddenly the tiny pin she imagined that kept her body intact—held her soul together when the world was rushing at her—worked itself free. She had glimpsed in those women something familiar, what she feared most—that her dream, the years of hard work, the late nights of poring over text books and staring at a computer screen had led here—a dead end.

Luisa fought back tears and stilled the tremble within. Her legs were starting to give way. She felt herself sinking at the thought she was Sheila, Jean, and all the other women put together. The heat from the other passengers pressing on her was unbearable. The driver braked sharply, causing Luisa and those around her to reach for anything solid. The air became stifling and warm, her breath coming quickly in shallow gulps. She remembered her grandmother all those years ago telling everyone how proud she was of the granddaughter who had gone to university.

"I'm a fraud," thought Luisa.

The other passengers began jostling around her but there was no room to move.

Luisa began to fall. An outstretched pudgy arm pulled her up and over to a seat.

"Crikey girl, you all right!"

Luisa started apologizing. "I don't know. . ."

"You're not . . .," Bar started. "You're not up the duff?"

She shook her head baffled, feeling awkward noticing the stares of the other passengers.

"What you looking at?" Bar admonished those around her.

They rode along in silence for a few minutes before the dam burst; Luisa babbling about everyone expecting big things, how she couldn't let them down, and if only they knew how ordinary she really was, living a small life with big dreams. And the men for whom she felt only disgust. Being forced to get them off.

Bar listened then pressed the bell. She led them off the bus and hailed a taxi.

“Come on, I know just the thing.”

It was a short walk through a series of one-way streets before they arrived at a group of flats on the border of an industrial park. They climbed to the third floor and Luisa was grateful that Ielu had the small ones with him. Bar strode along like a mother hen, and Luisa’s shoulders slumped forward. Feeling beyond repair, she followed closely not wanting to disappoint her younger friend.

They stopped at a door surrounded by cacti and other succulents. There was a strong smell of lavender from a small potted bush, where Bar unearthed a door key.

“Mum, just dropped in for a cuppa,” she yelled as they stepped over the threshold.

They walked through a dim well-kept kitchen into a foyer mobbed with ballerina dolls and old family photos before coming into a cosy lounge. It opened to a small veranda, which jutted out to overlook a block of workshops and small warehouses. A woman’s voice beckoned them out.

It was the stout figure of Robyn.

“Your mother?” stammered Luisa.

“How do you think I got the job?” Bar answered.

Mother and daughter laughed as they seated Luisa and poured her a beer. She shook her head, but there was no refusing. Bar filled her mother in, and Luisa pretended not to listen as she watched some men next door unload boxes from a container. She found their repetitive actions restful and soothing

“You need to get your eyes checked,” Robyn said turning toward her.

“I don’t understand,” said Luisa.

She led Luisa to the foyer. With her left foot she kicked the dolls out of the way to reveal portraits of her children, her sisters, and nephews and nieces. There were faded news clippings of a beautiful teenager in a satin ballet outfit, her blonde hair pinned perfectly into place. It took Luisa a few moments to work it out.

“It’s you.”

“You think you’re the only one with dreams,” said Robyn. “I’ve watched you, cowering away on your telephone too scared to say boo!”

“Too scared to say fuck,” Bar interrupted. “Hell, I’m surprised you’ve still got a job, you make any of them fullas come?”

Luisa looked away. She’d never really discussed the phone sex with anyone other than Ielu and even then the details were kept sketchy.

“I’m proud of what me and my baby does,” Robyn said pulling Bar in close.

“Yeah, beats working the picture theaters,” her daughter added dangling a cigarette between her fingers.

These women . . . they had seen right through her. Luisa started crying. They had so little to spare, yet they were baring their souls in a bid to shore her up.

Robyn strained to stand on the tips of her toes and brought her small feet together, raising one leg to extend the point, gliding a hand in an arc motion overhead. After being widowed in her twenties, she had buried her dreams of dancing on the stage.

"I know where I'm at, and her," Robyn said beating at her pendulous breasts while turning to her daughter. "This is my girl!"

Bar had tied her hair in plaits, which made her look like a young girl. "She's got a mouth on her."

"Abso-fuckin-lutely," Bar crowed.

"She gets the job done though, best time average in the whole company. Fullas ringing up from all over the show and who they asking for? My baby girl."

"But you," Robyn was turning on her coworker. "You've pissed me off right from the start," her face contorted, the bridge of her nose tensed up. "You've got something going for you, I know," Robyn was on a roll. "You're one of those smart ones. Bet you were an 'A' student right through school. A year from now you'll have forgotten all of this. And us."

Luisa sipped gingerly at her drink, wiping at the condensation as the glass fogged over. Her thesis would be finished in six months. So far there were no offers. The only possibility was an internship with one of the main television networks. Life would be different.

"You haven't got the stomach for this, have ya?"

Luisa had to agree.

They didn't speak and for a few minutes the only sound made came from the television in the next room. Luisa crossed the room, placed her arms around Robyn and sunk into her, squeezing her tight.

"You might be onto something. The meditation . . . It helps. Relaxes you," she said into Robyn's shoulder.

Her head was shaking as Robyn's sobs grew, Luisa felt as though she were clutching herself, their pain so familiar.

"Maybe," Robyn tried composing herself. "Look at us. We make a pair." They were both crying and laughing.

"You dry those tears love," Robyn told her. "Finish your drink. That family of yours be wondering where you got to."

"No hurry," Luisa surprised herself hearing the words out of her mouth.

"Choice!" said Bar running in. "Time for another beer."

She headed to the fridge door pulling it open. Her mother exchanged a knowing glance with Luisa, the sort parents do when they're feigning annoyance.

The two women were back out in the street; they were silent as they made their way along the factories toward the main street, daylight seeping away. Luisa checked her watch. She could still smell the lavender, and the faded photos of dreams danced in her mind. She smiled at the thought of her grandmother and Robyn and imagined their unease with the other. They were definitely from the sisterhood, Luisa thought. Her grandmother had soldiered on till the final moment. Robyn would be like that. They were the plodders who somehow made everything possible for women like Luisa.

It wasn't long before the seven-four-six came whirling around the corner. Bar climbed aboard and began hunting her pockets for fare. Luisa placed her money on the tray.

"This is for my friend and me."

The younger woman smiled and led them toward the rear of the bus. She told Luisa of her dreams one day to open a stall at the weekend markets selling odds and ends as well as jewellery she had made herself.

"Well, why not?" Luisa encouraged her.

"Yeah, why not," Bar repeated.

The bus moved away from the drab of the factories toward the outskirts of the city, through the green belt of parks and reserves, before slowly making its way out to the suburbs.