

Travis Englefield

Two Hat Mouse Trap

“**Y**ou come down here often?” the man asks, crossing his right leg over his left.

“I’ve been a few times but not too often, no,” the woman replies, staring into her cup of tea.

“You see a lot of strange people. A lot of freaks. It’s good people-watching.” He scans the plaza, as if to prove his point.

“What do you mean when you say freaks?” the woman asks, narrowing her eyes, not accusingly, more like inquisitively.

“Ah, you know, you got your speed fiends, your born-again, the conspiracy theorists and then there’s the ones that are nowhere near any category you can think of. Freaks at the supermarket who think they’re stocktaking on-board a rocket to the moon.”

“Uh huh.” The woman pauses to consider her response. The man doesn’t pause to wait for it.

“I mean there’re some really rich people that hang out down here too. Billionaires flying in from Saudi Arabia or wherever. That’s some serious people watching. I mean, you might see a guy taking a phone call and it’s not just a phone call, it’s a transaction that’s actively causing the economic world to turn. Like I said, all kinds of freaks.”

“Do you consider yourself one of these freaks then?” the woman asks. She turns her gaze to the clock on the tower across the plaza and then quickly back to the man.

“That’s some heavy shit, sister,” he laughs. “No, I’m out of the picture, I’m just the witness.” He pauses, shakes his head. “Imagine that—someone watching me watching them.”

“Witness protection,” the woman intones. She considers this shooting-of-the-breeze, considers whether it’s enough to make it not impolite to bring up her motivation for meeting the man, which, extant facts dictate, is different from his motivation for meeting her. She considers for too long and he fills in the silence with another inane question.

“You grew up in Melbourne, then?” He sips at his coffee.

“Kind of. Wasn’t really Melbourne then. You know Woodend?”

“Of course.”

“Well, the sprawl didn’t stretch so far back then.”

“Right. And your parents worked at the labs out there?” He reaches over to the next table, where a newspaper is crumpled amongst empty cups and saucers.

“Um, you know, it’s funny. I mean, yeah, they did but . . .” she trails off as she tries to figure out whether the guy’s actually listening whilst flicking through the paper to the racing guide. He returns his attention to her.

“And you left when you finished school?” he asks, as if she is the one making things difficult. Infuriated, she ‘accidentally’ knocks her teapot onto the ground.

“Yeah,” she says, ignoring the thing smashing on the wooden deck, “I moved to Nepal to study Eastern philosophy.” The man calls a waiter over to clean up the mess.

“My sister’s hat was blowing away and in her attempt to catch it she knocked the teapot off the table. You should speak to your manager about having some wind-breakers out here.”

“Where is the hat now?” the waiter asks politely.

“Well, it blew away, didn’t it?” the man says impatiently.

“I’m terribly sorry. I’ll see if we can fix you with a complementary Two Hat Mouse Trap. It’s our famed three-course-meal-in-a-bread-bowl.” He scuttles off before turning back to add that he’ll have someone attend to the mess shortly.

The man shakes his head sternly.

“So, Eastern philosophy, you were saying.” He takes a sip of his coffee. “I guess you had a troubled childhood then?”

“I don’t have a great memory of my childhood, you know. I think it was fine.”

“Sure, sure,” the man says, disbelieving or disapprovingly. The woman can’t tell which. “But Nepal—that must have been interesting.”

“Well, I actually never made it to the school. The plane crashed on landing or in trying to land, depending on your definition of landing. I mean, it was the most dangerous airstrip in the world—it’s abandoned now—so I guess they gave it a good shot. I was the only survivor.”

“Gee, that’s some luck!” the man exclaims.

“But according to public records,” the woman this time glares at him and goes on, “a girl called Taima Xu was the only survivor. Only they couldn’t find her.”

“You mean you traded identities with this girl?” the man asks, finally paying attention. Another waiter arrives and begins cleaning up the teapot. The woman considers maybe now the guy is listening and she can tell him what she’s really here for.

“Well, yeah. Passports, ID, bankcard. We looked kind of similar, you see. She was a Chinese-Australian. Dual citizenship. So I hiked through the forest and crossed the border into Tibet. It was a pretty tumultuous time there and so I slipped through the cracks. Some authority-type people—I don’t know who they were because I couldn’t speak Mandarin at that point—”

“You can now?”

“Sure. But anyway, these people took me to Chongqing and I kind of found myself living at this commune for the politically dispossessed—that’s where I learnt Mandarin—and life kind of started all over again.”

“Right. Gosh. You’ve had an interesting life then,” the man says.

“Well, yeah, I guess so.” The first waiter arrives with a huge bread bowl filled with something that’s not quite soup, not quite anything, just a kind of goop.

“As, promised, a complementary serve of the Two Hat Mouse Trap, our famed three-course-meal-in-a-bread-bowl.” He flashes a broad grin.

“Thank you so much,” the woman smiles. “I’ve never had one before.” She looks at the man.

“Neither have I,” he laughs. “You know,” he continues as he eyes the waiter, “this woman is my sister!”

“You don’t say,” the waiter responds, uncertain what this information should mean to him.

“I haven’t seen her for thirty-nine years.” He smiles and the woman’s heart sinks.

“Incredible!” The waiter’s surprise seems genuine. “It’s good to see you’re getting along so well.”

“Certainly,” the man nods. “These things can go horribly wrong, or so I’ve heard. I was in fact warned by another sibling, well, half sibling. My brother Jonas told me . . . What was it? Something like ‘given the decentralisation of evolutionary biology, there’s nothing to necessitate old world familial relations’, which I think is bullshit.”

“Yes, I mean . . .” the waiter is deterred from continuing by the call of a superior.

“Um, you know Quentin,” the woman says, being the one to break the silence, “I’ve got to run off, I’ve got to meet a client. We can do this again another day.”

“Oh.” The man deflates. “You sure you don’t want to eat some of the three-course-meal-in-a-bread-bowl? I can’t possibly eat it all myself.”

“I’ll just have a little taste.” She picks up a spoon and has a little taste.