

Commute

Daylight seeped in through linear gaps in the blinds. Tiny particles floated in each panel of light, like miniature debris in orbit. The sound of crunching gravel came from next door, followed by a short cursory ding and the soft thud of a car door closing. It was then Sara realised she had overslept.

Her watch vibrated on the bedside table. ‘Your ride is arriving in thirty minutes,’ the voice said, measured and soothing. When Sara first set up an account on Commute, she’d selected neutral for voice notifications. The result was a nondescript accent, neither here nor there, like a diplomat’s child who was used to packing up and moving countries every couple of years. Sara took a fresh towel out of her cupboard, balanced her make-up bag on top and rushed to the bathroom. Afterwards, there wasn’t any time for breakfast, so she grabbed an energy bar, smoothed down her long pencil skirt and sat on the edge of her bed in front of the mirror. Ever since she signed up for Commute, she always checked how her clothes behaved when seated.

She had downloaded the app six months ago. It was marketed as the hybrid baby of a rideshare and dating app and when she first saw the ad for it, she thought it was trite. Women sipping on pastel-coloured cocktails in a dim bar, their freshly plumped lips resting on the edge of long-stemmed glasses. Men in navy blazers circling the room like piranhas. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcased a mess of high-rise buildings, and the neon traffic lights below. A framed picture of a vintage car morphed into small screen grabs from the app floating in and out of view. The scene was supposed to have a corporate, dreamlike quality, yet it only

served to confuse. The words ‘*Comingle, Communicate, Commute*’ moved across the screen in a font currently popular with designers.

‘More like “Copulation, Compromise, Co-dependent”,’ Sara said, rolling her eyes at her housemate. Yet two days later, she found herself looking it up. She often ordered cars to travel to work and was active on a slew of dating apps. Combining the two came with the allure of efficiency. Commute presented profiles of others who lived and worked within a certain proximity to you. Once a match occurred, there was the option to rideshare with the person. After the drive together, you could then decide if you wanted to waste any of your real time with them. The kind of time reserved for family, friends and bingeing drama series with cheese-flavoured snacks and tempranillo. Sara’s previous rides had mostly been a disaster. There was a guy who spent the entire trip on his tablet, tapping the screen with exaggerated force, and another who pulled out a waxy string from his laptop bag and began flossing. Sara had been ready to delete the app and stick to more organic forms of dating instead. Rooftop drinks in the open air, overpriced coffee at an industrial-style cafe. Anything other than the leathery confines of the back seat of a car during rush hour. Then, she matched with Theo.

‘Hey Sara, your car is two minutes away,’ the automated drawl said again. Sara clasped the watch onto her wrist, opened the app and skimmed through the details of the car: a sleek white sedan with a personalised numberplate: *echo*. This would be her first ride with Theo, a product designer in his early thirties. They had matched two weeks ago, and in the days that followed, they discovered a shared aversion to under-seasoned food and tropical holidays – why would anyone pay to plunge themselves into humidity? He spoke to her desire for non-generic compliments by mentioning the inimitable arch of her eyebrows. She admitted how words always sucked her in. He was more well-read than any of her friends and gave her his take on the trope about books always being better than their film adaptations. *It’s*

hubris really, words rely on our own imagination. No one wants to admit there's a better director than your own mind's eye. Banter sprinkled like confetti throughout the day.

Sara walked out the front door and saw the car parked nearby. As she drew closer, the car door opened automatically. She sat in the back seat and placed her bag neatly at her feet. The smell of peppermint air freshener hung heavy in the air, a mixture of cleaning products and candy. Sara sniffed her wrists, hoping her perfume wouldn't clash.

'It's that time! Your commute is about to begin.' Her watch jolted along with the voice notification, as if it was giddy in anticipation. The door closed, and the car pulled swiftly away from the kerb, the seat adjusting for optimal comfort. A slight warmth emanated from the leather which now felt as though it was holding her in place. A few minutes into the drive they pulled up in front of a cafe, and just as Sara swiped her watch to check her reflection in the reflective surface, the door opened. There stood Theo, with two takeaway coffee cups. He thrust one in her direction.

'Oat latte, right?' His eyelids were slightly heavy, as though sleep was still beckoning him.

Sara smiled. 'Thank you.'

There were small scuffs in the shape of crescent moons on his brown dress shoes, and as he nestled into his seat, his pants rode up, revealing socks with coloured pencils printed across them. His hair was curlier than in his photos. Brown spirals bound together like they were affixed with glue. There was a relaxed energy to him, and Sara felt hopeful as she savoured the warmth of the coffee in her hand.

'Time to commute,' both of their apps simultaneously sounded out. The voices overlapped, with a static enthusiasm.

As the car pulled away a gust of scented air left the vents. Sara heard birds chirping nearby and savoured it. Since almost all the cars on the road were now electric and soundless, the quiet sometimes gave the illusion of perverse emptiness. She smiled at Theo in a way she hoped didn't seem mechanical.

'You know this is my first time taking a Commute ride.' Theo took a sip of his coffee. His long legs were bent in a boyish way, one of them lolling in a casual rhythm.

'Really? I'm flattered to be the first then.' Sara thought about the rides she had been on in the past, all could be categorised as either unmemorable or disastrous. She held out hope that this ride with Theo would be different.

'Yeah, I've chatted to a couple of people from the app, but never actually felt like meeting up.' Theo put his coffee down in the cup holder and reached into his bag. 'By the way, I brought you something.'

Sara watched as Theo pulled out an old copy of *My Beautiful Laundrette*. They had spoken about a mutual fondness of Hanif Kureishi's books and Theo mentioned he had a signed first edition of one of his favourite titles. The fact he still bought and read tangible books appealed to her.

'You should borrow it.' Theo smiled. 'This is the original screenplay. It was made into a movie too.'

'Maybe we can watch the movie together after I've finished.' Sara put her coffee down and took the book from Theo, hoping the movie invitation didn't sound too eager. 'Hey, I've seen a laundromat in Brunswick East called My Beautiful Laundrette.'

'Yeah, they named it after this!' Theo's eyes crinkled at the sides.

The book was slim with a faded cover. Sara opened it and noticed some of the pages were dog-eared. It seemed so well loved that she was half expecting to see comments scrawled in the margins. She read a few lines, conscious of Theo's proximity to her.

'I have a kid,' a husky voice said.

'Sorry, what did you say?' Sara turned towards Theo.

'That wasn't me.' Theo smirked, nodding his head towards the front of the car.

'I have a kid,' the voice continued. 'A boy. He's the age of cars and building blocks.'

Theo leaned across and whispered to Sara, 'It's the driver.' His breath smelt faintly of coffee and toast.

'I thought the drivers were supposed to stay silent during the ride?' Sara whispered back.

Commute sold itself on privacy, claiming their rides would emulate the serenity of being in a premium self-driving car, without the hefty price tag that came along with actually being in one. Drivers were only supposed to speak in instances of emergency, or if spoken to by the passenger. Sara squinted at the tinted screen separating them. She could make out the shape of the driver's heavy-set shoulders.

'My boy's mother is a real piece of you know what – she's trying to cut me out. All I did was have a few too many one night and unhook her friend's bra strap. Her top had come down, you know, the thing was just staring me in the face, that little blue clasp. Thought it would be good for a laugh seeing she was holding two drinks herself. No hands to remedy the situation, you know?' His voice was slightly muted, absorbed by the partition.

Sara looked over at Theo, who seemed to be stifling a laugh.

‘Only lets me see my boy on the screen now, some days. Most times all she does is text me about him. Tell me, how can a message tell you about a boy? A boy who smashes two cars together and says, “BUNG BUNG”.’ His voice crackled as it hit a crescendo.

‘That doesn’t sound very, uh, fair.’ Sara spoke slowly, recognising the genuine angst in his voice.

The car swerved suddenly and began to speed up. Her coffee tilted in the cup holder, and as she rushed to steady it, a few drops splashed wayward, staining the book in her hands.

‘Oh shit, I’m sorry.’ Sarah wiped the book on her skirt and put it into her bag. ‘He’s driving a bit crazily, isn’t he?’ she whispered to Theo.

Sara swiped across her watch face and tapped on the Commute app. She scanned for a feedback button, or a way to alert Commute HQ that something wasn’t right. Would there be a list of drop-down options for complaints?

The driver is talking when he shouldn’t be.

The driver is disturbed.

The driver has taken a wrong turn.

The car cut across two lanes before gaining speed again. The sudden motion tilted the coffee cup more and another splash of frothy coffee landed on her lap.

‘Is this the way to your office?’ she asked Theo.

‘No.’ Theo frowned, a chasm forming between his eyebrows.

Suddenly the road became wider, and Sara realised they had turned onto the freeway.

‘Hey, this isn’t the right way,’ Theo called out, tapping the filmy screen separating them. His fingers were slender and long, like an artist. When he brought his hand back down,

Sara noticed his fingers quivering, before his entire hand flinched, like a small animal. She felt the urge to reach out and hold it but instead gripped on to the seat.

‘He was born about a year ago, the boy,’ the driver continued. ‘His mother pushed for over an hour and when he came out, the cord, you know the one that keeps the baby living? It was wrapped around his neck. Can you believe it? His wrinkly little hand was on it too, like he was going to pull it off all by himself. I tell you what, destined to be his own saviour, that kid.’

This time Sara knocked on the partition. She knew it was useless, but she continued tapping. The disconnection between them and the driver that had been relaxing earlier, now felt like a hindrance. Sara wanted to see the driver’s face, for him to see theirs, maybe then he would change his mind, drop them off at work and then go about his way.

“‘Traumatic birth’”, his mother told everyone who would listen. No one ever asked me about it. Now, she leaves the kid alone and goes who-knows-where. Puts some snacks and water out like she’s feeding a puppy. She’s gone and left him right now, I know it. If I can catch him home alone, even just once, then she’s done for.’

‘Far out, is this really happening?’ Theo tapped on his watch. ‘I’m going to let work know I’ll be late. I’m supposed to be giving a presentation in half an hour.’

For a moment there was silence. The car jerked from right to left, overtaking other vehicles in its path. Sara pictured the driver’s foot pressed against the accelerator. Heavy and careless.

‘Hey, what’s your name?’ Theo’s voice was measured. ‘Would you mind slowing down a little? There’s no need to rush.’

No response. Then the sound of humming. Sara recognised the nursery rhyme; she could hear herself singing along in her head almost unwillingly.

Hmmm hm hmm hm hmmmmmm. Life is but a dreeeeeam.

‘How far do you think the house is?’ Sara leaned closer and held her watch up towards Theo. Together they saw the car icon moving off the freeway to an unknown end point. Sara then noticed the red emergency alarm icon in the corner of the screen. Small enough not to distract from the site itself, yet large enough so it wouldn’t go unnoticed. Sara thought about the horrid news stories of drivers taking advantage of drunken passengers, or unruly passengers hurling abuse at perturbed drivers. She wondered what would happen if they pressed the alarm – would it connect them to the police? Would the driver know and get angry? Theo’s finger hovered above the icon.

‘Maybe we should wait a bit,’ she whispered.

They turned onto a street and the driver slowed down, the car finally coming to a stop in the driveway of a small white house with large windows. The blinds were half open, and through them a silhouette of a tiny boy could be seen. He was standing on a couch rolling a toy car across the window. Up and down the car went repeatedly, each time with more force. Sara took a deep breath and scanned the plastic toys in various stages of decay littered across the browning lawn. A plastic wheelbarrow had fallen to the side, wiry green reeds sprouting from it, like an abstract planter. ‘I grew up in a house like this,’ she said, unbuckling her seatbelt and shifting her weight nervously in the seat.

The driver got out of the car and rushed up to the front door. He was even broader than Sara had imagined, with his hunched shoulders giving him the appearance of a question

mark. He pulled at the doorknob, banging his fist with the other hand. The boy turned his head briefly, then continued rolling the car up and down.

‘How should we get back into the city?’ Sara scanned through her apps, searching for one with driverless cars. Her legs felt slightly numb, pins and needles spreading down her calves.

‘Don’t worry, I’ve already booked one.’ Theo’s tone was reassuring. He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned towards Sara.

‘What do we do now?’ Sara asked. She didn’t want to stay in the car in case the driver returned yet was hesitant to get out. ‘Do you think the kid is actually alone in there?’ They watched as the boy sent the car up and down, occasionally turning towards the sounds coming from outside.

‘It’s okay, boy, I’m coming in,’ the driver shouted while tapping away on a mobile phone.

Theo opened the car door and stepped out. Sara followed. It felt strange emerging from the car, as though they were waking from a dream. Standing awkwardly on the verge, Sara noticed sweat patches on Theo’s shirt. The driver banged on the door with more force, making the windows rattle.

‘I’m going to try and calm him down.’ Theo said, making his way up the driveway. Sara stood and watched for a moment, then followed. She wondered why Theo wanted to confront him; he was slinky in comparison, his lanky arms and legs seeming even more fragile now.

‘Hey,’ Theo said to the driver. ‘Maybe she’s in the shower or something? I think the loud noises might be scaring your kid.’

The child did not seem scared at all. Sara watched as he stood on the couch, rolling the smooth white car up and down the window methodically, without making a sound. She walked up right in front of him and gently tapped on the glass. He paused and looked up at her. Sara couldn't be sure, but through the filmy glass of the window, she thought she saw the boy smile.