

Highway 13 by Fiona McFarlane

Tourists (2008)

Lena Derwent had worked at Mason's for less than a week when they started making fun of her.

'Well, hi there, handsome,' they said when she was out of sight. 'My name is Lena, and I come to you from the 1980s.'

'She looks like an art teacher,' said Gemma from Sales. 'Don't you think? Kind've over the top? Kinda demented?'

And Joe from Payroll laughed, as he often did when Gemma spoke, because he knew Gemma was unkind, but, but, what if she were to come unfurled, be private, open, alone with Joe—what then? So it embarrassed him to live on the same street as Lena Derwent and to have recognised her as soon as he saw her at Mason's, with her large, fuzzed hair, her slipped lipstick, her cleavage. She was the middle-aged woman in number twelve, who was out every Saturday working in her garden, whose large backside hung above her low front fence like the face of a sunflower. Sometimes she stood up from her gardening and said, 'Morning, sweetheart!' as he passed with his dog. Joe, smiling, polite, was never sure if the 'sweetheart' was aimed at him or the dog. And if she was still outside when he returned from his walk, he might smile again as she made an exaggerated motion: wiping her perspiring forehead with one arm, or pretending to bark at Groucho. She had a friendly bark—Groucho always replied, seeming to like it. Once she asked Joe in for a cool drink and some water for the 'pooch', and Joe stammered something out, said he had plans, tried not to walk that way again. So when Lena had arrived at Mason's and said right away to Joe, 'Hello, stranger!' it became necessary to laugh when Gemma spoke, when she was unkind.

'How do you know *her*?' Gemma had asked, and Joe explained that they were neighbours.

'Oh, out there in Murder Town?' she said, and he smiled; he disliked that name, but it was the only private joke they shared.

'Right in the heart of Murder Town,' he said.

A shudder passed through her: outsize, fastidious. 'Beats me how any of you can live out there.'

'Pure balls,' he said.

Gemma laughed, and someone called her name. So Gemma went.

Joe lived in Murder Town because his parents had lived there before they died not of murder but of natural causes, and now he lived in their house. This meant he had to drive to work and back each day along a highway that cut through a state forest. The trees of the forest rose up around his car: orderly pine plantations in some parts, and in others long, lean eucalypts with their loose leaves and their bark littering the greenish ground. The real name of Joe's town was Barrow. A man had lived in Barrow once, and in the 1990s this man used to drive the same highway—up and down for hours—to find a person, any person, who looked far from home, standing with a backpack at a junction or a bus stop or just walking along the road or waiting with a thumb out for a ride, and this man would offer them a ride, and if they accepted he would kill them and take their bodies to the forest. Or he'd take them to the forest and kill them there—Joe wasn't sure. The man had been caught and tried and had been in prison for several years. Joe drove daily through the forest, and there were no longer any hitchhikers on that highway.

Not long after she'd started at Mason's, Lena approached Joe as he sat in the park eating lunch—seemed to appear before him, really; she was very stealthy for someone so large—and said, 'Mind if I sit?' She held a thin, stained sandwich.

Joe gave his Saturday smile.

Lena's sandwich, unwrapped, was spread with something green, which he knew would get in her teeth and stay there.

'Now tell me,' she said. 'I've been thinking of getting a dog. You have that gorgeous, clever little guy. How old is he?'

'Around five or six, I think. I don't know for sure. He's from a shelter.'

'Aren't you a darling,' she said, biting into her green. 'Is he part bulldog? He looks it. That's what I'm after. What I want's a guard dog.'

'A guard dog,' said Joe. He ate the last of his own lunch with a conclusive flourish. The park was visible from Mason's.

'Can't be too careful, right?' said Lena, conspiratorial. 'Anything could happen. Considering where we live.' She licked her thumb. 'Pesto,' she said. 'I grow the basil myself. I'll bring you some.'

'No, no.' He raised his hands as if he were about to push a flat, heavy object away from his body. 'That's really nice of you, but please don't worry.'

Lena didn't look worried. She smiled as he stood up, lifting her face to him; but because she was looking into the sun, her eyes narrowed. Her smile was placid, drowsy, flecked with green. 'It's not for everyone, is it,' she said, and he assumed she was referring to the taste of pesto. She closed her lips and ran her tongue along her upper teeth.

'Bye,' said Joe, and Lena gave a happy shrug.

She never came to him at lunch again. Occasionally, he saw her sharing a bench with Jenny, the receptionist, who was having marital trouble and would talk to anyone. Gemma said Jenny cried in the toilets sometimes, poor thing. Lena made overtures to others without success. No one was rude, exactly, but she began to spend her lunch break reading at her desk. She was careful about her break, Joe noticed. She started it whenever Mason went out for lunch, and though he was always gone at least an hour—a fact of which his previous PAs had taken full advantage—Lena was back at work after exactly thirty minutes. No one wanted to drop things off for Mason while he was in his office, for fear that he would stir behind his desk, peer around the doorframe, and ask them in to 'have a word'. No one wanted to have a word with Mason, with his nicotine teeth and his 'call me Bob'. So they came when he was out, and they all saw how Lena spent her break.

'It's always true crime,' Gemma said, watching as Joe coaxed the coffee machine. 'The books she reads. Have you noticed?'

Joe hadn't. He preferred to go to Lena when Mason was present, despite the threat of being drawn into the office: its wood panelling, its yellow light, as if it were perpetually Sunday afternoon in there, in the 1970s. Joe risked all this so as not to seem as if he'd approached Lena herself, alone, with some neighbourly affinity.