

Toothpaste

Callum McCrow

Before I went to the airport, I ran out of toothpaste.

As soon as it happened it felt inevitable. For the past month I'd been more or less throttling the tube, and each time it dutifully spluttered up a dollop. Today though, all it did was wheeze. I tried every trick: rolling from the bottom, squeezing corners, running water into it and pushing it back out. No good. The tube was sputterless.

I take it as an article of faith that there's always more toothpaste. There has to be at least one fluoridated molecule, and if there's one there's two, and if there's two there might be three — enough at least, to massage into a fluoridated lump. But today I was on the clock. With a flight in less than two hours, my faith was found wanting. I tossed the tube in the bin. Water and bristles would have to do.

On the plane a baby seated in my row tried to eat the safety instructions. Her parents gave her a dummy, then a rubber ring, but the baby was having none of it. She knew what she wanted. A real go getter this infant. At one point, in frustration, she headbutted the eating tray on the table in front, then began to cry. Finally her parents gave her the laminated sheet, and she happily chewed on an illustrated person fitting their oxygen mask. She stayed quiet until we landed and the seatbelt lights came off. Somehow this reminded me of something. I'd forgot to pack a toothbrush.

The flight was to make good on a Christmas gift. I come from a split family. Each parent lived in a different city, married a different person, and had different children. This made it complicated to keep up with everybody's lives. Long ago I learned the folly of treating my family as a set of individuals. It was called a family unit for a reason: to justify purchasing group Christmas presents — tickets to a show, usually.

The ticket trick was almost tradition by this point. It gave me an excuse to visit, the family a reason to get out of the house, and everyone put in the effort to play nice while we were out and about. There was the security of a definitive end to the event. A sense of temporary adventure, where we could behave like more interesting, respectful versions of ourselves than we did while wandering about at home in our track pants. All this meant the memories formed were happy ones. Even the struggles to find a carpark became amusing. And if anybody noticed that emailing pdf tickets meant I could purchase gifts on christmas eve, they left it unmentioned.

But this year there'd been a change. For complicated reasons Mum and David, my stepfather, had separated and were now no longer on speaking terms. For simple reasons, my sisters, Naomi and Sarah lived with David. Sarah was ill, so our unit was more of a trio: Me, Mum, and Naomi. And that was okay. Downsizing was good. It made us nimble.

The performance was at the Malthouse, a niche theatre that put on a lot of professional artsy stuff. Halfway between a uni theatre and a real expensive place like Southbank, it was in a stone building with a lot of gas heaters out the front. I'd walked there from the CBD with two backpacks of luggage and a double quarterpounder. Mum and Naomi were coming by train. While waiting I had a

chance to read the novel I'd brought, a satire of rural romances, but my eyes hurt too much to focus, and mostly I looked at people's dogs.

Mum and Naomi arrived, both smiling, both a little gaunt.

In the theatre cafe I ordered a beer, changed my mind too late, bought a coffee, and then drank both. Mum and Naomi shared fish and chips. We talked about Naomi's interest in sign language, fashion, Korean. Her struggles to find a job. Mum discussed her garden. Somebody asked me how university was going, and the conversation stalled. For some reason, when people, and family members in particular, ask direct questions, I become evasive, as if representing a corporation investigated by a senate inquiry. The usual strategy would be to divert attention elsewhere, but without Sarah and David to prod there were no other wheres where attention could be diverted. When was the last time it had just been us three?

An announcement that doors were opening broke things up. In the line outside Naomi and I got told we weren't allowed to bring our drinks in. Naomi skulled her coke, and I, to Mum's displeasure, tucked my coffee, served in a takeaway cup, into a jacket pocket.

The troupe playing did mimes and sketches about the larrikin characters of the Australian suburbs. A lot of the bits felt like they'd been done by Kath and Kim, but there was one impersonation of a snail that cracked us up. It felt like a moment of honesty. The speed of life back then, out there, when the whole family (or the whole of this half of the family) were all together all the time. The main thing anyway, was that when Mum and Naomi came out of the theatre they were laughing. I felt like a duty had been successfully discharged.

On the way back to the station Naomi noticed the streetlights had gone purple. I told her that it was a problem with the phosphor coating used in LED's. Big brother delivering trivia was comfortable territory for the family.

It was well into the evening, and cold, by the time Mum and I got off the train. She lived far out in the Melbourne suburbs, and no longer had access to a car. The walk back took about ten minutes, but she'd mentioned there was no food in the house, and I wanted to buy some toothbrush and paste, so we agreed to drop past Woolworths on the way. When we got to the centre Mum went off to use the bathroom. I went to Woolworths to get a headstart on the shopping, and discovered it was closed.

After that the walk home in the dark was quiet. Or it felt quiet, even though Mum was bubbly, asking about my life and talking about her hopes for hers: fix up the house, conclude a legal suit — hopes that often trailed off into fears about homelessness. I knew I was meant to get involved in this. Express strong feelings one way or another. But each remark I felt like I needed to sit down and think about, and a familiar pattern returned where I hid behind making almost offensively polite conversation. Assenting to everything, asking brief followup questions, ignoring anything asked about me — as if I was a doorman at a hotel. The only serious question to escape me was one about how rent was being paid on the house.

The last time I'd been there Mum, David, my sisters and the dog had all been together. So arriving was the first time I'd seen the place with just Mum.

Placed underneath a skylight in the centre of the living room was a large pot plant. Cupboard doors had been removed from their hinges. Everything was in a state of being packed - not quite away, not ready for use. There was a lot of empty floor space, clean but not tidy. Mum offered me hot chocolate with powdered milk. I said no thanks, but found a fruit bowl with a crisp pink lady inside. I took it as Mum showed me around, letting me see the work she'd been doing.

Apparently the house was on some minor fault line and had twisted. There were gaps in doorframes, cracks on walls, holes in skylights. Mum had read the tenancy laws and knew she was obligated to inform the real estate agent of any issues in the house before they become larger problems, otherwise she could lose the bond or have the lease terminated — not something she wanted to contemplate in this rental market. After the tour, she asked if I wanted to watch T.V, then if my Dad ever talked about his past. Rather than answer either question, I said I was feeling sleepy.

I was downstairs, on an air mattress in David's old room. Him and Mum had been divorced for years before he moved out, so he had his own bathroom down there as well. I had a vague recollection of having left a toothbrush behind the last time I was there. If they hadn't been cleaned out I might be in luck.

I checked under the sink. There was a white brush like you'd get in a hotel packet. There was also a tube of toothpaste. I picked it up. It felt light, hollow. The tube so compressed that it was not possible, really, to squeeze it any more than one could two blank pieces of paper together. It was David. Even though we weren't blood relatives, didn't look like each other, didn't have any similar interests, we had a similar attitude toward toothpaste. He'd kept his faith in this tube to the very end — abandoning it rather than giving up. And rightfully so, because there was some paste dried up around the edges of the cap. I put it on the brush. It looked a little calcified, but did the job just fine. Nothing is ever empty. Not really.