

Ellie Catton – Farewell

A musician was standing under an arch at the railway station, looking down the length of his nose at his fingers, cupped around the throat of the violin. His tune was lively and he moved his weight from foot to foot. I sat down on a stippled bench nearby and he smiled at me. 'Are you waiting for someone?' he said.

I said, 'I'm leaving.' I pointed at my suitcase.

'The city has shrugged you off,' the violinist said. 'You were forced to lose your purchase as the city rolled to turn upon its shoulder and find a better lie.'

I said, 'What?' I was looking at his hands. They were thin and blue-veined and swollen at the knuckles. The hand that touched the strings was muscular, and the hand that held the bow was limp-wristed. They were like two halves of something whole.

'I mean, I don't blame you for leaving,' the violinist said. He lifted his chin clear of his chin-piece for a moment and said, as if he knew my reasons, 'The earthquake's overdue.' I said nothing. I watched as a man finished his soft-drink and dropped the can, still half-full, to the ground. It fell with a smack and did not roll.

The violinist finished his tune, wedged his violin beneath his chin and tucked his bow beneath his arm. 'Look,' he said. He cupped his hands to make a basin. Then he lifted his wrists up with a sharp savage movement and flattened his palms. He said, 'Last time, the shock was so violent it dislocated the water in the harbour. That was the upward thrust. The city was lifted up and the water slid away in a massive wall and slammed into the ocean. For a moment the harbour became a desert, vast and empty. Then the earth plunged down again, and the water returned.'

'How long?' I said. 'How long was the harbour empty?'

'Only minutes,' he said. 'Long enough.'

I was silent, and he resumed his playing. I imagined the sea floor, moist and streaked and greenish and starred with bottle-ends and rusted junk, gasping like an open fish-mouth stifled by the air. I imagined the earth still trembling. I imagined the people running out, dropping from the docks onto the green stones of the sea floor, running forth into the

yawning throat of the harbour and crying out with something like delight at this land that they had never truly seen.

'But they wouldn't,' the violinist said. 'They wouldn't run forth. They would be trapped underneath their shopping carts and their exercise machines, and they would be dying. They would all be speared by panes of skyscraper glass.'

'Not the politicians,' I said. 'Their building has special rubber seams to catch the movement. Parliament would only wobble. The politicians would survive.'

The violinist laughed at this, and said 'I suppose you've taken a tour,' and I said, 'Yesterday,' and then I said, 'They used fifteen kilometres of sprinkler pipes, all up,' and the violinist said, 'That's a bunch.'

We watched the crowds go by.

'Some of them will be in the bath,' the violinist said. 'The tub will crack open, split clean down the middle, and they will sit and watch the water drain away. Some of them will be in cars upon the roads, and the severed tram-lines will fall like nets and pin them there. Some of them will be asleep in their spindle-legged houses, and the stilts will snap like kindling, and they will crush their neighbours as they fall.'

He looked at me sideways and said, 'Not you. You'll be all right. You're leaving.'

'Even if I wasn't,' I said. 'I wouldn't be one of the ones to die. The dead would be the ones I've never heard of, the peripherals, the extras, the strangers that pad out the crowd.' A couple passed us with a Lord of the Rings Location Guidebook. The man said, 'Elijah Wood pissed in the bucket fountain.' A woman said to her dog, 'You're getting your figure back, Gypsy, yes you are.' A Korean boy pointed to his skull and said, 'I got this hat in Queenstown.' Women clutched their shopping to their hearts. After a while the violinist modulated gracefully into a different tune.

I watched a mother with a little boy. The boy veered toward an empty burger wrapper and the mother said, 'No. Yucky.' She tugged on the back of his shirt. He leaned away from her and instead reached out to touch a faded disc of chewing-gum on the pavement. 'Yucky,' the mother said. 'No.' I watched them walk across the platform, the mother tailing him all the while and saying 'Yucky- yucky- yucky- no.'

After they left I thought about the earthquake some more, the giant backbone shiver that might one day fell this whole city like a crop in harvest. I thought, no, I wouldn't be one of the ones to die. I wouldn't be in a car or in the bath or crushed. I'd be one of the ones in blankets, drinking rationed water and opening cans from the emergency box, leaping over the toothy asphalt cracks that opened up on every road, as if the city had swelled too big for its own skin, and burst.

'That is your fault-line, then,' the violinist said. 'Not to count yourself among the dead. The station-master approached. He held his finger up and said, 'You're not allowed to busk in here.'

'I'm not busking,' the violinist said.

'You're not allowed to play for money,' the station-master said. 'Not without a permit. You need a permit to earn money here.'

The violinist said, 'I'm not busking. I'm playing for free.'

Above them, a sparrow stunned itself against a bright pane in the high roof, and fell like a stone. The violinist pointed at the bird with his chin and said, 'He mistakes the window for the sky.' The station-master scowled. My train pulled into the station. I picked up my suitcase and the station-master walked away.

The violinist said, 'Maybe as the water runs away from us we'll see an echo-city, a backward underwater copy like an imprint in the harbour floor. The echo-city will stare up at us, and we will see a concave mirror-image of ourselves.'

I said, 'My train is here.'

The violinist took a few steps, as if he meant to follow me.

'You'll see the earthquake from far away,' he said, 'wherever you are. Maybe on television. You'll see footage of the places you walked through today, the places you knew.' I said, 'I'll make sure I watch.' Just before I stepped through the doors and disappeared the violinist said, 'I suppose that a fault-line is just something to hold on to, in the end.'