

The Favourite

Before I see his face, I see his penis. In a cage behind rusted bars he's sitting on his haunches. Then he looks at me – or rather I lift my head and look at him. Though I have never before seen his face, I know he is the boy from my dreams. Under the house, on my knees, I stare at him and then I hear my mother calling. Through a gap in the weatherboards I see her in the garden carrying the tomahawk she uses for splitting our firewood.

But the boy doesn't exist. And he never will. What I give you is the fantasy of a seven-year-old girl that has become an old woman's memory. This old woman is now an unreliable witness, even to herself. She is a woman who mumbles in front of her friends as if she were asleep. She is someone for whom a bed with hard sheets is waiting a few blocks away. It's a bed not far from an activities room where someone will play piano. She will sit amongst men and women her age, with rugs across their knees, and listen to melodies that seem to come from a radiogram never permanently turned off in her mind.

He doesn't exist but her mother is real.

She smiles at her young daughter and asks her to help in the kitchen, to take the knives to the drawer and place them inside, quietly, because she doesn't like the clatter and racket. The young girl may lick the cake spoon – if she must – but not the inside of the bowl because that is a filthy habit, reserved only for those without manners and with no likelihood whatsoever of gaining any.

Her mother wears a floral apron, walks from bench to table, flour covering her arms; flour joined with water and the sun through a kitchen window so that her arms begin to flake. My mother's whole body turns white, flakes and collapses to the floor as I lick the spoon. I see her in pieces on the wood floor and then her face is in front of me, speaking.

'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Sorry mother.'

'You should be young lady.'

Only women visit our property and they talk with my mother in the sitting room. From where I sit in the library I hear muffled voices. One afternoon I enter to ask for a glass of water and my mother and another woman together on a settee move suddenly away from each other. Then the stranger goes back to signing papers on the mahogany table and my mother shouts me out of the room.

I meet him in a dream.

I am underwater and the women around me wear iron suits and upon their heads large yellow helmets with tubes extending from them and up towards the ocean's surface. I am as naked as when I get out of the copper tub at night, shaking droplets from my skin as my mother smiles and towels me. But she is not amongst the women underwater, the women whose mouths beneath their grills are saying that I must swim upwards, quickly, because I have no breathing apparatus, I am drowning. Behind them a large fish swims and then appears too suddenly before my face, eyes dark and bulbous. In that moment he swims past, too, yet I don't see his face. But I see his nakedness, the roundness of his buttocks, his calves scissor kicking, the length of his arms stretching and bending.

He is older than me.

In a lace nightgown, I lift myself onto my elbows and breathe salty, midnight air on this our inland farm. The curtains beside the open window are motionless and there is a crescent moon and the sound of a dog somewhere, far away, barking.

The dog stops barking and it is my birthday. I am 10 years old and my mother turns to me at the breakfast table and explains that I will not be going to school until I am 13, if I am even to go to school at that age. There is, for certain, no need for me to go to primary school. My mother says there has never been a need for anyone to go to primary school because teachers with their bad breath and canes are snide and she should know, she says, she should know. My mother watches the willow tree branches trying to push through a kitchen window and I nod at her, but she doesn't see. I go to my room and gather my hat and gloves because it is the day for our weekly two-hour shopping trip to town and I must be ready when Mr Forsyth arrives with the horse and cart for our silent journey.

I sit between Mr Forsyth and my mother and watch his large and gnarled hands grip the reins, but I make sure my mother doesn't see me looking. When we get to town men and boys are everywhere and my eyes widen until my mother stares down at me and prods me in the ribs with her index finger. I look at the ground, the footprints from large boots all up and down the red and orange dirt.

Between shops I take the risk and look up again. Men are talking on street corners, chins pointy under black hats, moustaches moving with smiles and laughter. I look at the hardness of the men's cheekbones and jaws and wonder what winds they have withstood to become so sharpened. They tip their hats at my mother and she ignores them as we pass. I hear muffled words and sometimes guffaws disguised to sound like coughs.

The one time I ask my mother where my father is she screams and cries for several hours and I can hear her no matter where I hide in the house or on the property, even the last gum tree at the fence line where our property borders the McTavish's. The next morning when she finds me she says my father died when I was a baby. I don't remember him, she says, though it was a dream about him that made me ask his whereabouts. But my mother says I must have been imagining things because I can't remember him. I hold her hand and walk inside.

My mother showed me photo albums when I was young, filled mainly with pictures of me, dressed in white lace or wool, bonnet tied under my chin. But on some pages there are four triangles set at the corners of a square, a square that should have held a photo, another building block for memory. But now I have only the memory of a photo's absence, keeping unsteady the memory of someone who doesn't exist. Who shouldn't exist. My mother quickly flicked past the pages with gaps and later, I'm sure, the gaps are filled with photos of me.

We're standing on a street corner and Mr Forsyth drives his cart towards us. As ever I have not seen my father amongst the men in town. But I have seen the boy. No longer naked, no longer underwater, he is in men's eyes, in voices gruffly calling out from market stalls, the price of fish or meat. Mr Forsyth climbs down from the cart and pats his horses. My mother holds my hand and the boy is there in the way she does it. There in the warm fold of her hand itself.

Do you like the way it looks? It's real. Touch it.

There are always cake spoons to lick because my mother bakes relentlessly. Orange sponges, poppy seed, two-tiered hummingbird, black forest and caramel fudges. There are hedgehogs with sultanas as well as breadcrumbs, carrot cakes and fruitcakes and banana walnut loaves. Pikelets become my favourite but I do not tell her because previously I told her marble cake was my favourite and she stopped baking it.

Surely there are too many cakes for the two of us. Leftover slices are fed to the chickens and the occasional quarter cake, always cream, is in the rubbish pile. But the pikelets in the meatsafe; I know my mother doesn't like them. I haven't eaten them all, have I? I ask about them and soon, I recall, there are no more.

From the stairs late in the evening, I watch my mother knitting large garments. Some she lays on the hallway chest, coats for the horses to wear on winter nights. One night she carries to the door a smaller garment, freshly knitted, opens the door and returns without it.

I enter school and despite the gaps in my memory and education I also enter university because my mother assures me it is essential for a woman to have an exemplary education. At university I read Sigmund Freud and I think I understand that my life is partly an imagining. The boy and has been a waking a dream, a phantasm; the creation of an unconscious at war with a mother and indebted to a dead or missing father.

The lecturer stands tweed-suited at the front of the auditorium and continues the therapy which began when I was a young girl and the psychiatrist entered my room, the night the police brought me back from roaming in the night. The lectures concluded after several years and my mother died soon after they finished and then more therapy followed for me. Free association lying on a leather couch, afternoons of Rorschach drawings that seem now also to be dreams. Lectures, dreams or sessions, they all fill me now with the wish that I could believe everything I am telling is but a symbol, dragged from my unconscious because no one could possibly remember what I believe has happened.

It is in the asylum – how long ago? – that I first cry out.

He's real. Oh my Lord, he's real.

The exclamation is one among many, of mine and others'; a cry born from too much or not enough medication, bouncing off the white walls of the mid 20th century, raised from convulsive therapy or panic the nurses come to inject with soft dreams.

Don't tell her that you know. She'll kill me. You're imagining me . . . Can you do that?

I see him in dreams in the weeks before I meet him. Or are they dreams I had after I met him and he left my life? Or my life left me.

I am flying above clouds in a plane which doesn't have an outer casing, yet navy-uniformed and smiling hostesses I've seen in my mother's magazines parade the aisles, their hair-dos tightly bunned and secure under hats glued to their heads, their skirts not so much as rippling in the wind.

He is a voice speaking from where the cockpit of the plane should be. Then he is a cloud and then a pig in a pen that turns to his human shape, a muscled back, buttocks tight on his frame, but no face.

In the dream the plane never lands and the boy under the house is five years, I guess, maybe six years, older than me.

My mother is coming with an iron axe. With teeth that burr with machinery.

Twenty-five, is it 30 years ago, I am reading Freud, or possibly Jung, in my cell over and over and the doctors walk past, no longer bothering to open the door and ask what I'm reading. I have discovered another universe and I slip my hands into it through the pages and pull them out covered in stars.

My mother hands me another spoon and I lick it.

My mother gives me a puppy. I lose it one afternoon while she bakes. I look up at her smiling face in the kitchen window. I search, below the window, push past the pittosporums and agapanthus that seem to be more and more flowers but then become a mural painted on the weatherboards. The mural has a door with an open padlock and later at university I read about the significance that locks possess in dreams.

I crouch down and enter the door, climb under the house, to the smell of rotting vegetables and cakes and I see a shape in a cage – a pig? – and I am not dreaming or speaking, I am not, and the pig makes no sound. He is there. Not in the eyes of any man in town or the memory of my father who I have never met. He is there.

Put your hand there . . . that's it, yes. Now rub . . .

The freight train stops at the station and the boy climbs on. In the darkness I make out the shape of his hand reaching for mine. I hold my hand out and though I can feel my body pushing my hand towards holding his, I don't grip it. I watch him in the carriage doorway, the train edging slowly down the track, his face visible for a moment under yellow light then

gone. I wander away, aimlessly into the night, until I am picked up by the police and taken to mother, who smiles to have me back and holds me. At least this would be how things were if I had not read in university about what the unconscious is trying to say when it imagines trains and what it means to be taken home to mother rather than catching a train with my brother, who has escaped from my mother and from me and yet has taken me or my imaginings with him. Yet there is a something of me that remains in the company of my mother.

The day after I meet him I still see his penis and his face and my mother's tomahawk and I am in the kitchen with her and she's baking a cinnamon bun, then it's on the table, wafting sugar heaven into the sunlight.

'Mother, do I have a brother?'

Her face turns to icing. White and candleless. Then she laughs and flushes.

'What kind of thing to say?'

I look at the fullness of her breasts, the round smile of her cheeks.

'I just wondered?'

I run to my room.

That feels good, just there. Now harder . . . Use your mouth now.

The police bring me back and the same night or the next night the psychiatrist is in my room, bowler hat and glasses. My mother says I cannot go downstairs, I must be in my bed where I can be monitored. The psychiatrist helps me with my imagination. Investigates it.

Asks it questions. Tells me imagination is an interesting thing, but we cannot trust it. It must be trained, broken, like we train and break a horse, like my horse, Merrick.

‘Do you remember when you first rode him? Did he buck? Yes? Your imagination is difficult to ride. But it can be broken.’

He goes with me into my imagination, then goes with me beneath the house. Or is under the house now in my room? There are empty cans and broken porcelain plates in the earth. Turned earth. Freshly turned, I’m sure. No mural. Pittosporums and agapanthus undisturbed in front of the weatherboards. Then we’re standing beneath my mother’s kitchen window and I can see her, hands in the sink and I can smell pikelets in the oven.

I am a witness to what is real. And what is imagination. And whatever exists between the two. A witness also to whatever a therapist believes or a mother denies or the dream about a brother foretells. I am an old woman ready to be taken this afternoon to where there are hard sheets and harder nurses. All their eyes are black, they will be, and I hear now a knocking on the door and then a key that opens it. My daughter enters, hair in a bun, the way my mother wore her hair when baking.

I am an old woman and I am unlocking him again and he is leaving his cage. I cry and tell him I am sorry for when I have played with him and that I could have unlocked him sooner if I had not enjoyed the playing and he is an old man and smiling and saying they were better than the games our mother played. Then he is a young boy and crying and running through wild flowers and a paddock in the night, past the gum trees, sentinels that line the fence and gate and I am running with him. I watch him running ahead of me, wearing my long pants; he is an ‘itinerant worker’, that is our ruse if we are questioned.

My mother isn’t coming into this or any room to take me to hard sheets, she carries a cake spoon, she has lost her tomahawk and doesn’t know where to find it. The policeman knocks on the door and she bends down and holds me and whispers, doesn’t she, that they will never know and you will never know, either. And then she looks at me and hugs me

again and says aloud, My lovely, beautiful boy. The policeman doesn't hear the slip. He must not have heard. He walks away and my mother scowls.

I lower my head to the pillowcase of my new bed and the lights go out and on again and photo albums fly in front of me, their pages turning. I see photographs of men in town, waiting on street corners, then one man, then a boy; photos float to the ground while the light flickers on and off; a boy, a man, an elderly man, asleep, hands folded and shut into a kitchen cupboard while my mother bakes.

What is your favourite, darling, what is it? I will make it for you.