

SHADOWS

Lime tinted silver-eyes dart to and fro pecking banksia stamens. Bees cascade down the stamens intent on their pollen procuring employment – there is a dull hum and twittering.

I lie contentedly on the sun-lounge, my book fallen to the ground. I doze and then twitch awake – sometimes with my recurring nightmare and other times at any strident sound – such as the postie’s whistle, which sends our dog, Tusky, into a fever of high-pitched whines remembering when he drew blood.

My children play in their acid green paddling pool. There is much laughing and splashing, and yells of rage.

“Mum,” bellows Peter, “Virginia’s wee’d in the pool. She’s a dirty pig!”

I mumble “Stop it, grub,” and move my shoulders from the scalding sun. I half open my eyes and look at the technicolour scene: camellias are like prim painted ladies and the phlox like blobs from a runny paint box. Kids in striped primary-colour bikinis.

The shadows of the wavering gum trees play hide and seek with my body and mind. My kids flick water at me; I shiver, and remember my youth.

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We live in a worn-out wooden house close to the city. To have a bath we have to fill up saucepans from the gulley trap as the pipes connecting the water to the kitchen and bathroom have rusted. “Those bloody pipes haven’t worked since Adam was a pup,” Dad jokes. We heat the water on the gas stove and then Bernadette and I lug the water to the tub. It takes a lot of will power to smell sweet.

Washing-up is a mammoth twice daily job for the nine of us – Mum and Dad and the seven kids.

I suppose I am a whinger. “Mum,” I say, “if you hadn’t had all of us there wouldn’t be so much washing-up all the time!”

“Elizabeth,” she says, “it’s God’s will, dear. Get on with the dishes and Bernadette, you give a hand, too.”

I carry on a bit about Danny getting more banana custard. And he does too, because he's a bully. Mum gets sick of me complaining and sometimes she chases me with the fly swat. It's a great indignity to be belted with squashed flies and I give her one of my surly stares. Sometimes I drop a cup or saucer just to be nasty. I want special attention I suppose.

Mum and I just don't get on at all.

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The old house is flush with the footpath and we can hear people walk past and chatter night and day, and drunks prop themselves and their wobbly bottles against our front door. They swear and call God every name under the sun. The drunks look like puppets with their invisible strings attached to the heavens. They quote from the Bible, "He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him."

Then the drunks call upon their fuckwit God and curse him for their condition. Mum disapproves of their blasphemy and tries to shoo them away from our front door using her bristly broom against their behinds as if she is sweeping up rubbish. Dad tells her to stop. "Oh leave the poor bastards alone, Cathleen," he says. "But for the grace of God you'd be like it yourself."

Dad changed to a Catholic just to marry Mum. He's pretty forgetful about it all though. Not Mum, she remembers all the right rituals. We have fish and chips Friday night, never meat. "A pathway straight to purgatory will open up for you," we are told if we lust after a chop on a Friday night. Friday night is also pay and plonk night for Dad. And something-else night as we listen to Mum and Dad's sagging bed go squeak-thump-squeak-thump and then after a few minutes Dad starts his spitfire snoring and Mum gets up and has a cup of tea and cigarette.

Irish Catholicism permeates their lives and Mum's best friend is the tubby joke-telling man of God. "Ah, and how'd you be, Cathleen, on this day fit for a Queen?" he asks.

"I'm fine," she says. "Cup of tea, Father?" as he lifts his dingy black jacket before settling himself in the old velour chair covered with cat hair.

“Thanks Cathleen,” he says.

“Father,” says Sean, “Mum chases drunks with brooms. Would God see what she is doing?”

“Ah Cathleen,” says Father. “Remember the words, ‘Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.’”

“See Mum,” says Sean. “God can see down through the clouds.”

“Cathleen,” says Father. “How’s Bill treating you? You look very thin and worn out.”

“Bill’s a good provider and father,” says Mum. “The kids drive me batty, especially Elizabeth. She’s a little devil at times.”

We all laugh and Father nudges Danny and says, “That right, Danny, that right?”

“See you on Sunday, Cathleen,” says Father. “Eat lots of good food to keep your pecker up.”

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Mum stops eating solid food. She says she has a lump in her throat all the time and she just can’t get the food past the lump. She exists on strained baby foods sipped through a straw. She chain-smokes.

She becomes too scared to go outdoors, and her life centres around us and the weekly visits from Father Hannigan.

Our poverty is a pervading rat infested, cabbage-water smell lurking and leaping through our hair and soul.

I’m thirteen and Dad has just about given up the battle to survive. He gets stuck into the grog and staggers home, his eyes bloated and his face a puce colour. He’s got a beer gut, and yet his face is thin.

He tries to jolly Mum along a bit and tells her to seek some help from her fears. He does try.

We kids pester her.

“Mum, Mum,” I yell, “how about we go to the Botanical Gardens or the Zoo? It’s a beaut day!”

“Soon, Elizabeth, soon.”

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Mum'd been young when she married Dad – both only twenty. They married quickly as I was on the way. “Trust you Elizabeth,” Dad says, “to drop in at an unexpected time!” and he pokes me in the ribs. Laughing.

We look at their wedding photos and I can dimly recognise the plump pretty girl with white roses scattered through her auburn hair and a floating floor length veil. Dad is in his Navy uniform and looks so handsome.

He is also tattooed.

Arm pits covered in writhing snakes, navel a base for a vagina, and a facsimile of Chloe on his left buttock. Compared to Mum he was really experienced and had slept with lots of women – even black and white and yellow. “Spotted ones?” we ask. He nods his head and says, “Thank the Lord I’ve got the wisdom to leave the checked ladies in Czechoslovakia!” and we double up with delight. Mum pats the python resting on his arm and he flexes his muscles and makes it wriggle and we screech with pretend fright.

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Mum has been belting me for years. Ever since I can remember.

“Elizabeth,” she says. “Be a good girl for me, dear, and bath Sean.”

“Oh, I don’t want to, Mum. It takes too long and I’ve got to do my homework.”

This time she claws at my face and pushes me against the fridge. Shaking me, constantly shaking me.

Both of us cry. We hug each other and she begs me to forgive her.

“Oh Mum,” I say, “come off it, you didn’t mean it.” I feel hurt all the same though. She definitely picks on me more than the others I reckon. Perhaps because I’m the eldest.

Another night Dad takes four of us to Luna Park and we go for a ride on the Big Dipper. Wow, what a treat!

UP UP IN THE AIR, I CAN SEE ACROSS THE WORLD.
ACROSS TO THE DUSTY APRICOT COLOURED CITY
SKYLINE. EVEN TO WILLIAMSTOWN. WE HAVE FAIRY
FLOSS TO EAT. DUCKS TO SHOOT. WE SING. THERE
ARE GREAT BIG ROLY POLY CLOUDS. DODGEM CARS.

Dad and I pose together hidden behind waist length curtains and take our own photographs. We poke our tongues out, go cross eyed and poke our fingers out from our ears so that we look like bats.

It was a good night.

Mum is bloody furious when we get home. Dad's a bit drunk. And Mum yells out to him that he should be paying a few bills and not wasting his money on us at Luna Park.

Also, he bought me a kewpie doll.

"I know you, Bill," Mum says. "Drunk as a skunk and using Elizabeth as a shield so you can eye off all those St Kilda trollops! Go to bed Elizabeth, at once!" and pokes me in the belly with the stick from my kewpie doll. We hear them fighting that night.

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We know that Mum would love a garden so we pick her roses and things hanging over people's fences on our way home from school or when we've been playing at friends. She can't get cuttings herself because she never goes outside. We kids take turns in doing the shopping. She has a small wooden flower box planted with nasturtiums and she lovingly tends them, squelching the sour soil between her fingers.

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I find that I'm stroking the lawn with my fingers. But the kids are still playing happily in the pool, and I let my thoughts return to my mother.

She was very thin. We realised later that her anxiety and depression were so severe that the visits by the social worker and Father Hannigan were like a feather hitting a car.

She play acted.

We should have forced her, bent her arms behind her back and pushed her outside and to the doctor, gagged her to stop the appealing voice saying she could cope, and got her treatment.

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The crunch finally comes and it is directed against me.

On the way home from school that Tuesday it starts to rain heavily. I feel like jumping in the puddles and gushing gutters and I play my game of dodging the lines in the pavement. That means two big steps and then a little step. Very time consuming – but if I don't do it I'll be forced to marry a chinaman.

I get home late.

My hair is in brown chunks and the water dribbles down my back. My green school ribbon has stained my face and I look a bit like a slimy dragon. A cold and shivering one.

The younger kids have arrived home and aren't as wet as me.

Smart Danny had covered himself with newspapers pinched from the school rubbish bin and Therese, ever cunning, had thrown her gym uniform over her head and was dry – of course, knowing her.

Mum is sitting in the kitchen. A saucer full of half squashed cigarettes beside her. The kitchen a hell of a mess.

“Mum,” I say, “why are you smoking so early?”

We play this game that she doesn't smoke till after 5 p.m.

“Best to have all my sins together,” she says, “and then I can feel like a glutton!” as she sips her sherry.

I notice that she somehow looks different. She seems to have become even thinner than this morning when I'd kissed her goodbye before walking to school.

“Elizabeth,” she says. “You're the eldest, how could you have got so wet?”

“Mum, what's being the eldest got to do with me being wet?”

Dad is home early. He's changed jobs again and is lying on the couch jiggling the baby. He's already slightly drunk. He has the telly on full pelt. Bang bang from the telly robber. Squeak of brakes from the pursuing police car, tearing up and down San Francisco's steep hills. Jingle jangle of ads.

It happens quickly.

Mum runs at me with a half full bottle of beer that she grabs from beside Dad. She is yelling like in a cops and robbers film. She hits me across the head and face with the bottle, and glass and grog squirts over me into my already wet sandals. There is blood teeming from my face.

I am badly injured.

Father Hannigan comes immediately – I suppose the neighbours rang him.

The kitchen smells of stale cigarettes and spilt beer. Steamy kids are screaming and the budgie is wriggling his mirror in time to the yelling.

Mum rocks me backwards and forwards and calls me her little angel and all of that. Crying, constantly crying.

I spend some time in hospital and they want to take me away from her.

But we love each other Mum, don't we? Even though we can't get on.

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I am jolted awake by my youngest child tickling my toes and playing 'Eenie meanie minie mo, catch a nigger by the toe . . .' and the kids all nudge each other whispering and giggling.

"We've tricked you, Mum. We've played a game on you!"

I feel something prickly against the skin round my navel. They had crept up on me whilst I was half dozing half thinking and made a pattern of a war ship using grass cuttings.

It kind of reminds me of Dad's tattoos.