

Bill Collopy

EDGE OF CONTENT

She swims and floats, spraying cologne of chlorine. Emerging in a black one-piece, she squints at glare on the pebble aggregate, puts on Bolle shades, wringing hair free of her swim. Feet in the shallows she smooths legs newly waxed then squeezes number fifteen. No one heeds her body.

Her left-hand neighbours—of the Spanish-style villa—aren't home. They'll return post-Christmas to throw parties: cars cramming the court, drunks falling into the pool. Everyone up here has a pool. As guests snore next morning, she'll be on her patio, shaking off sleeping pills with a plunge. Her right-hand neighbours—of the New England design homestead—attend sales conferences at Port Douglas or go windsurfing.

The hill dozes. This morning she hears not a sound, no racket on ball, no TV. Her watch shows nine-thirty. Asleep on her towel with raffia hat covering her face, she notes that her ribs are still breathing. This cannot be real. She is screaming as she flings a Mastercard in Greg's face. She is phoning the bank to treble her credit limit, then telebooking cosmetics to the value of ten thousand dollars. She is sliding into the pool and soon she will stop being alive.

In the kitchen she rouses herself with iced coffee via the espresso machine, and gazes: a stainless steel splashback, granite bench-tops gleaming, a sparkle of rangehood. Pots and pans hang, near obsolete. As children Brett and Rachelle would clamour for favourites: pasta carbonara, Black Forest cake and roast chicken. She cooked treats for them, squashed in a two-bedroom flat. Now on the hill they rarely eat together, each hurrying to be elsewhere. She sips coffee alone, humming to classic hits radio:

"Age of consent: the right to say Yes, the right to say No ..."

How foolish, a bubble-gum of her pre-teens, when Whitlam was PM. She wore flares. Her figure survived a diet of Chiko rolls and Coke.

"now you're a woman, girl has to go ..."

And she used to mishear lyrics. She used to think this one was "edge of content," having no idea what that should mean. Now her reflection in the kettle stretches and swells: eye-sockets ringed with grey, hair frosting at the roots. Planes of her face slide outwards to resemble her mother. The mouth

pinches at both corners. Armpits wrinkle, and cleavage, and swimmer's thighs that fed on sand and sea. Age of consent. Yes, she had waited, though boys were less patient.

She met them at school or the surf club—dance partners, kissing partners—learning more at the beach than school. On sand, in a caravan park or bathing shed shadows. Jon was her first, then Pete, then Barry the lifesaver. Then, just as she was finishing school, a boy called Bill. The two of them were as close as she imagined love to be. She confessed her hopes of escaping Rockhampton. He talked of writing a play. Bill took her to dances. Afterwards they kissed for hours, lost in one another's faces like in a movie. Then he went away to university. He promised to come back. His parents moved. She lost all trace: no phone, no letters.

During her morning swim she sometimes wonders what happened to Bill, whether he married, died young or prospered. After he left she stayed in her room, not eating. A doctor put her on pills. Then she met Greg, who'd been in love with her at school though she hadn't noticed. Bill went to a different school, boys only. He had told her clever things, made her laugh, told her she had a beautiful voice and should take lessons. He would touch her hair as they kissed. Greg didn't touch her hair, only her bum. He said he didn't earn much as an apprentice but he had good prospects. Greg wanted to share his plans with her. She got pregnant. Agreeing to marry him she began to fall in love with the plans and dreams.

More iced coffee. She gazes past a sash window at houses on the hill: lichgates, crazy paving and Merbau decking. She inspects carriage lamps and arches of garage doors. Former display homes, they cast illusions of summer heat, seeming to tumble like dominoes to a road where street lights perch in Federation mode. She checks her answer machine, flicking on security switches. The unit blinks a red eye like other homes where alarms go off by accident, whoo-whooping the daylight. No one will answer them: no one home. Burglaries occur during school holidays or the ski season. Her place has been done over twice. Last time they took TVs, VCRs, the computers and Brett's electronic keyboards. Often a second break-in follows months later, scooping the insurance replacements. Greg jokes about a New for Old turnover, calling it "the stocktake."

Reversing her Lexus out she navigates through Crescents and Closes, turning up her radio, changing channels, angry with classic hits.

Why do they always play bloody "Hotel California ...?"

Upon reaching valet parking she wanders through a palace of retail, having weeks ago completed her Christmas buying. She shops anyway: laces and bustiers, scarves, shoes and chemises, spending eleven hundred dollars before lunch. A sales assistant pretends to flirt with her, going through the motions like a dance step, sticking out his bottom and putting on the voice. Her gorge rises. She's read to be sick, right there in the boutique.

Finding toilets off a corridor she vomits up her lunch. On the floor she gapes at tiles, recalling years when she and Greg used to clean such floors, her daily routine. In a porcelain bowl she spatters yoghurt and salad: disgusting yet familiar. Has she dreamt about this? Almost ... What is different? Has she imagined black bile instead? The mess hasn't risen as expected.

After cleaning up she shops again, flashing another of Greg's cards. Two dozen paperbacks. She loads videos into a Coles trolley—all on credit. Passing a jeweller's window she spies gold bracelets. With the Amex card she orders three.

Driving home she passes an ambulance: alight but silent. Someone lies under a blanket. Police fend off onlookers. Tow-trucks and medics continue to mop. Her eyes seep, flickering the image of Bill. It might be him under the blanket—now, or any time in the last twenty years. He wouldn't look the same. And he would not know her. She cranks up her radio, wishing to forget last night, when she switched on her lamp. Greg's toes were cold. He slipped into bed at three a.m.

"Where've you been?"

"Sorry. Out with mates."

"You could've rung."

"Phone was flat."

Greg began re-setting his alarm clock.

"Don't apologise. Do I know her?"

He chuckled back, as if she were joking.

"Didn't mean to wake you."

"Tell me who it is."

"Don't be silly. Go back to sleep."

"I haven't slept. And I know when you're lying."

He slumped onto the pillow, scratching his scalp, perhaps weary of pretending.

"Well, if you insist. There was someone. But it's finished. Satisfied now?"

He said that. Satisfied? *Serves you right for asking*, he meant. She opened her mouth to answer. This could not be a joke. She wanted to get words out. Could it be the first time, or had she just been stupid? Seventeen years! Her stomach hollowed, as if he'd sliced out a section.

"Look, I'm sorry," said Greg, "but these things happen. And it's finished. Okay ...?"

Her throat hurt. But she didn't shout. Words jammed. Head throbbing, she flailed for answers. Greg yawned. Soon she heard him snoring. Quite still, as small as she could make herself, she rose from bed to take a second pill in the en suite. She fingered Dorf taps and Sheridan towels, dazed and stupid. Downstairs she found a corner chair, hugging knees to her chest. She gathered up happy memories, scraps from childhood: smells of a beach, mango with her cornflakes, whiffs of horse manure from the riding trail behind her parents' house. Then she lost them. She tasted Greg's smart answer:

"What am I supposed to do for excitement around *here*—mow lawns and wash the cars ...?"

The contempt in his voice! she knew that tone. He blamed her then fell asleep. Unable to close her eyes, she felt the floor crumble. Walls lost firmness. She fell, pitching into silence. By dawn she had regained some balance. She retrieved happier times: wedding frills and lace, proud parents, her church hall reception just a frisbee throw from the beach where waves rumbled throughout the service. Father and uncles got drunk. Her mother ate lobster, too poor as a girl ever to have eaten it:

"I always expected it to taste special," she wept, "but it's just *fish* ..."

The MC had a bad comb-over, in pink shirt and white collar. Greg kissed her for the photographer, while inside Brett was growing. Born during a Rockhampton heatwave, with mercury over 40 degrees, the child would be jaundiced. A bushfire roared less than a hundred kilometres away. Smoke drifted in the hospital windows as she tried feeding him.

What day is it? The time ... School will be out now. Neither of her offspring can be considered children any more, both tall and pale, without joy. Brett wears a sneer, when not shouting at her. Rachelle dyes hair black, smears chalky make-up. Nan made the mistake of asking, during the last visit:

"Don't you have friends? From school?"

"Dickheads," sneered Rachelle.

Nan was down for a week, forcing the family to endure a poolside barbecue. She commented on her granddaughter's many earrings.

"Got a problem with that?" said Rachelle.

Nan tried asking Brett whether he preferred rugby or AFL. Brett sniffled.

"Bor-ing."

Recalling the awful afternoon brings further guilt. She should ring her Mum: it's nearly a month since they spoke. Is this how her own daughter will treat her? So hurtful the way Brett and Rachelle behaved when she took them to Rocky one school vacation, squirming with flies and scoffing at the houses on stilts. She helped her mother peg out washing and greet the old neighbours. Her father and Greg lightened wallets at the races. Brett and Rachelle stayed inside, watching TV, not speaking to cousins, scorning the beach. Brett went into town one night and came back stoned.

And she used to feel gratitude towards Greg! He did rescue her from adolescence, a life-long itch for things that Rockhampton couldn't provide. He wooed with his panel shop and landscape gardening franchise, convincing her of prosperity if only she'd come south with him, where the markets were. Yet each dream evaporated for lack of funds, abandoned for bigger schemes, for a sure thing. Greg went broke. He blamed Keating, the Recession, Asian imports. She convinced him to set up a cleaning business. In partnership they ghosted offices in the hours before suits. She longed for sunshine. And she hated scrubbing the muck of toilets, picking up strangers' blood-and-snot tissues, a spill of sick or used syringe. She and Greg gathered junk that the folk in ties and shoulder pads chucked on the floor. Bins emptied by magic, thanks to the night elves. Retreating to their flat they huddled in blankets to save on heating bills. They had to leave their baby with a friend she didn't trust—but who came cheap. They worked shifts, grabbing sleep then starting before breakfast. Brett turned colicky, disturbing her small rest. The friend was careless. Often little Brett came home with bruises and green stick fractures.

Now she swims. She sleeps in. She shops. Back then she worked all Saturday, finding only moments to raise a second child. She left Rachele in family day care: a house smelling of cabbage. But at last their business began to look up. Big accounts came. Money started to flow. Nine years it took them but she and Greg could finally afford their dream: at the summit of a development estate, putting their kids into private schools.

She supervised tradesmen, bought fittings and browsed colour swatches: walls to be papered, spaces filled, curtain catalogues consulted. She haggled for the best price while Greg took charge of the business, diversifying with a garden maintenance franchise then a dog-grooming service then a car-detailing agency. He called it the "service revolution." She remembered a time when people mowed their own lawns and gave their kids pocket money to wash the dog. Approached by a retail chain Greg allowed the firm to be bought out. He acquired shares. He acquired land. Now he manages a software outlet. She makes hair appointments. She has facials.

It's late for Brett and Rachele. Or does daylight saving deceive her? Almost holidays now, she'll see even less of them. They'll sleep till afternoon then throw on clothes to vanish elsewhere—faces that she used to know. And Greg last night cracked the final crust of faith. Yet what about her own behaviour? At sixteen she slept with Tony Carr though she was going with Brian Mulvaney, and Tony was engaged to Vicki Spalding. A teen soap opera perhaps, but no better than Greg's conduct. She can't recognise that girl. Nor does she want to know if her fourteen-year old daughter has had sex. She remembers only emptiness, holding boys and willing them to keep holding. But their eyes would change: it wasn't her they wanted, only her gift. She would anticipate disappointment in the moment between love, sometimes only seconds, content to watch stars or a ceiling before the boy rolled off and got his breath back. Peace couldn't last. He was keen to be gone. And she believed that in some way it was her fault.

The back door crashes, announcing Brett: eyes of a sleepwalker, expensive school blazer torn at the cuffs. He heads upstairs. She calls:

"Going out?"

"Yeah. Back later."

If Greg were home he'd give the boy money and tell him to watch out for himself:

"Tied up now, mate. Can't stop to chat ..."

Holding a gin and tonic she turns on the evening news. Snowstorm chaos in Europe yet here she sits with damp armpits. She reaches for the air-conditioning remote, ignoring footage of IRA bombing and floods in Italy. Someone talks about child poverty. She flicks thirty-three channels; not caring what is on, only what *else* might be on.

There has to be a better program on one of these damn stations!

But she finds only dross: game shows, country music, sport, nature and sitcom re-runs. She mustn't doze off or she'll wake in the night. At a lonely hour she may not get back to sleep. *Has to be something worthwhile on ...* Cartoons. Movies. Rugby. Soccer. So many kids' shows ...

"one animal after another boards the boat until, finally, it capsizes with the weight of a single rat. There he is, teetering on one edge. Then over they go, all into the water ..."

In her entrance hall she finds no message on the answer-phone, nothing to inform of Rachelle's whereabouts—nothing from Greg. She saunters from room to room, nothing to tidy, nothing to fix. Slotting frozen lasagne she soon hears a microwave chime. She attempts to put meat and cheese in her mouth. Then retches.

She spits her mouth free ...

Throwing food against the architrave. A small TV hits the floor. Alessi kettle breaking the French window, scatters shards into California poppies and the Alpine aster. She yells, flinging a coffee plunger. Glass shattering, sprays grains on the parquet floor. She screams.

And screams ...!

Hoarse. Chopping the air, with no one to strike. Sound without words. *Boom. Boom.* Ocean drum. From a place way down, so deep the thing has no shape ... existing before she acquired language.

Yet no one has stirred, inside or outside, alone with empty homes. Not even an echo. She might be on Mars.

Lifting her face from the floor she finds hands bleeding from broken glass, and stares at soupy artwork beneath her. The texture resembles afterbirth. Remembering her disappointment this afternoon at the shopping mall, when she did not vomit blackness, she likens her screams of a moment ago to birth

contractions. An organism is slithering free. It steams and slides, tainting her breath ... conceived in the moment Greg said his words. And she has swum and shopped, while it has taunted, sticking fingers up her throat to be born from the deep, like a volcano.

In her downstairs bathroom she washes, bandages, her mirror likeness grinning back. She remembers. Not a sound did she make in Greg's presence last night. She withheld her answer—because talk will lie. Soundless to his face then ... And now. But he will know. She'll be watching. In the dark of his house she'll wait. And he will find her there each night, money spent and spent, doors unlocked, phone calls unanswered, tempting a force without one word.

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