

Jennifer Webb

OLD HANDS

Picture yourself, if you will, some forty years in the future. You are thirty-something now, maybe forty-something. Imagine you're some forty years into your own future. You are alive still, there in the future, aged maybe seventy-five, maybe eighty-ish, and stripped back by time to not much more than feathered skin, slow-moving crispy blood, and the restless patter of your heart that still nestles so confidently in your core.

Now picture me; picture me at eighty-two years of age, precisely forty years into my future. I have become ancient, but still recoil in unguarded moments from that old, old woman in the mirror, daily expecting to see the rich gold face I valued so, sixty years ago, and still staggered daily by its loss. I stagger, my bird bones rattling against one another, till the shards of muscle recover, draw my uncertain parts into a secure whole, and my old, old body straightens, and I make it across the paving slabs to one of those wrought iron benches where I can sit, carefully, and carefully recall myself to my middle-aged present.

I am sitting there today, on one of those benches in the centre of Civic, in the middle of the national capital, in that carefully sculpted shopping centre cum business centre lightened by the presence, now, of pretty cafes and African-look hairdressing stores and shops full of faux fur and Doc Martens boots. I am waiting outside, though it's a little chilly, and wondering if you will come this time, if you will meet me this time. Over there, on another wrought iron bench across the paving slabs, is someone who might be me at eighty-two, me in my deep future, and I'm sitting here in Garema Court in the centre of Canberra in the middle of winter in the dark part of this year. She is both me and not me. My soul, if that's what you call it, recognised itself there in that thin-boned body sitting ten feet away from me, and my soul, for want of a better word, gazed at her through my eyes — yearningly, it's too much, I must look away — for all the minutes I saw waiting, there in the ice-heavy air.

In my pocket is the shopping list drawn up by my impatient daughter. "You never remember to make a list, Mum," she said, "and then you always come home with all the things we don't need and none of the things we do." She handed it to me, this week's needs, written in her round confident teenaged hand. *Soap (teatree?), witchhazel, cottonwool. Tampons, toilet rolls, toothpaste. Dishwashing liquid, dried mushrooms, Drano (it's blocking up again, Mum. Bicarb and vinegar won't sort it any more). Something sweet for dessert tonight. Flowers for the dining room. Candles?*

A shopping list is difficult to read when it's written sequentially. I squint, and recast it in my mind so it reads in columns:

soap (tea tree?)	witchhazel
cottonwool	tampons
toilet rolls	toothpaste
dishwashing liquid	dried mushrooms
Drano (<i>no explanation required. No lectures, Jazzie, please</i>)	
dessert	flowers?
candles?	

Not much, for a week's supplies for a family of three, albeit we're not home all that often; albeit (a dead give-away, this list), we none of us do much eating at home.

We won't be eating together tonight either, I guess.

I'm growing cold, and you aren't here yet, though I'd hoped you might make it this time. You did promise. That you'd be here this time.

Look at me, already I'm growing into a petulant fretful old woman. I want to be serene. Like her, that old lady on the other bench, that future me. She looks serene, anyway. She creaks forward and rummages in her basket, and draws out a loaf of hard Italian bread, sliced and bagged. She looks at it closely, studying it you might say, turning it over and over in her craggy hands. I watch, wondering what it is she seeks, this old woman looking so intently, looking so intense. Why is she here in this cold air, this air that even while we independently wait is thickening, turning pale, forming flakes, drawing the late afternoon into a long slow moment of snow, or almost-snow, or the promise of snow? Her gloves, I see, are tucked into the pocket of her coat. They are lovely gloves, finely stitched and black. She should be wearing them. They are leather, elegant, finely cut and lying quietly in her pocket while her old blue hands continue to stroke and smooth and probe the bread.

I look away, for a moment, resting my eyes. I'm always so tired, it's maybe anaemia? And lack of sleep, of course. I got up so early this morning. You were still asleep, and I stepped on silken feet to your study, seizing the moment of

silence to move, carefully, the flutter of papers on your desk, looking for something I guessed I'd recognise only when it appeared. Because you, Tom, are hiding things from me. Only last night, remember, you reached into your jacket for your lighter and out of one of your pockets tipped a note that read, when I caught it up, "Virgin. Parmesan."

"Virgin?" I asked "Parmesan?" And you glanced down at me, scabbled your fingers at the cats draped around your feet on the floor, and took the paper from my fingers, and went outside to smoke your cigarette.

Tom. Tom the Teacher. Lecturer, that is. I've watched the young people in your courses, and I've seen how they look at you with eyes slow and soft, unguarded eyes offering you anything your heart desires. How could you resist? How could I not judge? You pretend, for my sake, and bring home often cynical stories and sometimes small gifts — a fan, a card, a scarf. And the day before yesterday, a bruise on your throat, a blue smudge below your chin, a certain puffiness about your mouth, that smug happy look I remember. You come home less and less reliably these days.

So look then to Jasmine, my daughter; okay, our daughter, Jasmine, who has elected to lure her father home by providing stability, structure, cooked meals. And who has taken to organising the kitchen, organising me. She draws up elaborate lists of things to buy, things to do. She draws up timetables, and charts, and places them on the fridge door, the back of the loo, inside my handbag. They read like this:

- Tuesday – dust window sills
- Wednesday – Jaz cleans bathroom; Mum washes floors; cook chicken lasagne.
- Thursday – Jaz home late; Mum to vacuum

She draws boxes on the list so that I can tick off each chore as it is accomplished. She believes this will work, this will draw us together again, this will provide the answer to the question none of us has yet begun to ask. Oh Jasmine, don't you know that organisational skills will never lure a lonely middle-aged man away from a stranger's unclouded eyes?

The air is taking shape, forming itself into clumps of slow cold rain, into almost-snow. Snow, Tom once told me, is the female element. Rain races competently, competitively, directly from heaven to earth. Snow is never certain. It swirls, it wanders, it wonders, it hesitates, it expends its energy on

being beautiful. Rain is never self-aware; but snow is each individual raindrop turned soft and heavy with self-consciousness, he said, fluttering so slowly through the air because each flake is looking, always, for how it appears to itself, to its neighbours. And each flake loses itself in its hopeless search for differentiation, falling at last into indiscriminate slush while the quick rain rushes freely away. When he told me that I immediately went on a diet for weeks, starving myself, until I lost interest in it all.

That story comes back to my mind with the scent of summer; he told me that story in summer two year ago when I had just turned forty and was feeling so uncertainly old, so suddenly saggy and clogged with cellulite and foul with denture breath (or, since I don't actually have dentures yet, their horrible threat). It was such a hot summer to be dieting, to be exercising, to be sweating and staring into mirrors hoping that this time the lines around my eyes would have softened, the lines of my cheekbone and jaw firmed up. One hot night, after an angry hour of waiting fruitlessly by the phone to continue my quarrel with Tom about time and whose turn is it to do what, I kicked the door shut, and headed off for the Dickson Shops, maybe ten minutes, maybe fifteen minutes walk away. On such a hot night. When Tom was lording it up at the Ag Show, doing his volunteer bit, being a voice for the people. I'm such a bitch, ignore me. Because I knew if I could buy groceries I'd be able to hold in place at least one element of the centre. What do we need? Butter, weetbix, toilet rolls. And I'm walking barefoot and distracted through suburban streets towards the shops that are over there, over in the distance, my EFTPOS card and house keys settled in the shopping bag. The night air is rushing with the sounds of the Show, the traffic grunting *huarrhuarrhuarrhuarr, hwhee, hwhee, hae*. Pause. And repeat. There is a siren singing delicately above the lower timbre of the road vehicles, and above everything else is Tom's megaphoned voice cracking incomprehensibly through the air and who knows what he might be saying? Or why he couldn't have phoned home.

I walk towards the traffic, the lights of the shopping centre are visible beyond, the traffic lights are flickering slowly red, amber, green and go; and I go, on through the traffic. Eggs, pinenuts if they're not too dear this week; do we need laundry detergent? Soap powder?

Listen. Listen to the people at play. Cars pass me —*vrummm vrumm vruuum* and how much will I be able to carry tonight, I'm pretty tired, it's been a long day again, maybe just two tins of catfood today and I can pick up a couple more tomorrow on my way home from work or maybe ask Tom to do it just this once, he loves them too, after all. There's milk, one litre, that's enough milk for breakfast, for the cats, for coffee tomorrow morning. Coffee. Do I have coffee? Enough for morning. Smoke em if you got em. We've got enough for now.

They're calling out, those strangers in the distance, it's like the cry of a motorcycle gang in a 1950s movie, it's the call of the mindless at play, I think and then chide myself for the thought. Uncharitable. And there, in counterpoint, is the *rrrrrrrrrh* of a trailbike heading to the Show and the fireworks are rumbling, from here the trees block out most of the pretty lights but not their grumbling roar, and not the occasional thrilled flare of a rocket exploding above the tree line, blanking out the stars. How do the horses feel, what do they think, the animals, how do they cope, shampooed and blowdried and prettied up for the Show? Do I need shampoo? I'm not sure.

The next streetlight has failed. I don't like that, walking in the pitch dark past dark houses. People go to bed so early here in Canberra, in the centre north of the city. Walk in the middle of the road where no lurkers can catch you unawares. Like teddybears. Do I need biscuits for school lunches? Will Jazzie want those little teddy biscuits, did she like them last time? Though she's a bit old for them, but you know teenagers are having a, what would you call it? Retro? Retro thing, playing at being kiddies even while they play adults. Don't worry about the dark streets; it's all too loud and too alive tonight for there to be danger, it's not like those Summernats savages, the Show is all about families and you know what that means. Bathroom cleaner, face wash, butter. I said butter already, didn't I? And can I carry this much home?

Tom's voice rises high above the traffic choir, hissing and coughing beyond the roofs that lie before me, to the left of the big Woolies ahead of me, down the road. Some sounds you can't escape: traffic on heavy nights, the commentators on race days, the announcer — my husband the part-time announcer — at the Show. I might buy some yoghurt. Flavoured yoghurt, a treat for eating something healthy. I'll buy the yoghurt, then go home.

And further down the road, at the Exhibition Park, Tom will be standing in the commentator's box, he could be sitting mind you, there's a chair there; in fact, it's an ergonomically correct chair, brought all the way from was it Sweden? But all day, or all afternoon anyway he's been sitting around on his arse and sometimes it feels so good to let the blood trickle down again, through his calf muscles, down to his heels, he stamps his feet as he walks or paces maybe, yes I think he paces, to and fro, baby, to and fro. He is wearing that nice linen shirt I bought on sale at David Jones, he is wearing a silk tie I bought him for \$120 at the duty free shop in Sydney, at the international airport, the store that's past the customs check-in counter. He is wearing good charcoal trousers, a pleat in the front dating them just a bit but still a nice cut, how well they hang, the red brick shirt, the grey pants, the silver silk tie. He will call tonight's events in his rich ABC voice, he will drink the cappuccino brought to him periodically by the work-experience kiddie, he said he'd phone but got too busy and though when

he left this morning there was a sharp tension between us he knows it'll be all right, he'll sort it out later, this is work, she'll understand. And there, onto the arena circuit, come the small fast cars, patterned and painted and revving *hrrachhrrachrrurchhurrah*.

Me, I took a taxi home. It's only about \$5, \$6, from Dickson to home. Unpack groceries. Call Mum for a chat. Call Val for a chat. Tom's busy tonight, acknowledge it, give him a break, he'll be home later on. So okay; make your phone calls, feed the cats, put the groceries away. And from my kitchen window I catch sight of the woman next door. I watch often; their lights are always on, the curtains never drawn. She is in her late middle age, one of those flat blonde muscled women, walking rapidly, never driving, often she mutters to herself as she walks, it could be a mantra but when I cycle slowly past her I hear the words. Butter, she's saying. Raw sugar, roasted coffee. She always walks, never drives, never even cycles though he does from time to time, always in bright lycra, his fast bright bike usually propped against the wall and chained to the column that holds up the roof of the porch. I know they're not happy, but after all who is? Their kids are grown, they have rich lives, but what can they have left to say to one another now so much has grown, I mean gone?

My ancient lady sniffs the bread now; and finally, crackling with cold, she replaces it in her light shopping basket and stands with surprising grace. She turns and looks back at me and we are suddenly eye to eye, and heart to heart, her skin is thin and blue and mine is drawn and white but otherwise she is me as I will be, accustomed to solitude, enchanted by the texture and scent of hard fresh bread.

I must buy food. Tom won't come now, it's too late. I must buy cleansing products. I must go back home and cook a meal for Jaz and me and let Tom be, if he has to kick around a bit, if he has to fuck around a bit, well, who hasn't? Sometimes? Tom's shopping list is in my bag besides Jaz's. His for work, he said. Buy it separately, he said. 6 kg sausages, 4 doz white breadrolls, tom sauce, marg, 1 bottle white wine, jelly snakes. A student's list. He is going with this food, he said, to a do put on by his students. I didn't ask if he expected me to come. He is too ... abstracted, that's the word, I think; and anyway Aida is on SBS that night and Jasmine will probably be visiting a friend and I can have the evening to myself to take in my hands my wonder at my sudden age, to take hold of my bolted-down rage against my husband, and my anxious anticipation, and I will take it all, and turn it and turn it in my knuckled hands, and I will probe it with my elderly fingers, and I will find out its secrets, and sniff at it, and smile, and then put it all away.

She is gone now, my old lady, but her fine leather gloves must have fallen out of her coat and they are lying on the paving slabs, hands delicately, even prayerfully at ease on one another, lying there together as the evening slides into cold winter's night.

I will go shopping. I will go home. I will cook, and eat. Tom will come home, or he will not. Jasmine will grow to accept me, or she will not. And I will go on day by day, watching my skin turn translucent as the pulsing life retreats to my little heart; I will feel my bones grow long and slender, see my breasts turn back to skin, see them lie flat across my ribcage, and my hands will change, they will change as over the coming years I sit and watch them, turning and turning, probing their component parts, and they will become, finally, soft gentle gloves left in a forgotten elegance on the paving stones on a winter evening in the heart of the city.

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