

Jack Forbes

The Conversation Between the Glass

When he woke in the middle of the night with his heart pounding he had to reach out and take Georgia's cool hand to know he was no longer dreaming. The hand limply responded.

Hmm... she mumbled. You okay, hun?

He slowed his breathing out in a shaky shudder. He swallowed.

Ray?

I'm okay, he said.

Bad dream?

Yeah. It's fine. Go back to sleep.

He felt the cool, smooth hand brush up his arm and leave him. You're drenched, she said, and rolled over on her side.

He shifted in the muck of the wet sheets. It was as though he'd come out of a downpour. Jesus, he said.

He got out of bed. His wife had fallen back to sleep. Sweat dripped down onto the top of his foot. He went into their bathroom, turned the light on. Holding a towel, he stood in front of the mirror. The sweat glistening on his naked torso reeling in skeins under the light. Finally, his heart slowed.

Back in the bedroom he touched the covers. Wet still. His eyes had not adjusted to the dark, but he could sense the mass of his sleeping wife in the dead silence.

He put on a shirt, went downstairs. In the backyard he smoked a cigarette. Grass blades through his toes. There was the giant tree in the corner of the yard which he stood by and stared. The soft growing dawnlight showed gaps between the tree leaves. Smoke trailing upward in the still wind like a ribbon. He peered closer at the leaves. Tiny orb spiders tossed threads of fishline web from one leaf twig to the next. One gap of leaves looked like television static in this light. He tapped ash from the cigarette. The hair on his neck stood brisk. He could still remember the dream: a girl, crouched at the bottom of a hole, like a well. Gazing down through the opening he saw the girl move and claw at the walls. The fingernails scraped like chalk. The girl stood, was taller, and morphed into some withered harridan. Her

face impossible to recognise, a flurry of expressions, sometimes ghoulish, sometimes lifeless. That was all he remembered.

He woke several hours later on the couch in the lounge room. Harsh slats of sunlight fell over his face. He heard his wife enter, the front door closing. Ray, she drawled out. You up?

He sat up, ran a hand through his hair. Hey, yeah.

She came into the lounge room, dumped her handbag and keys on the armchair.

What time is it? he asked, still looking at the ground.

Round nine. I just dropped Tom off.

I thought I was going to take him to school.

You were dead to the world. I didn't want to wake you.

He sat forward, elbows on his knees. He rolled his fat, dry tongue through his mouth.

You're working from home today?

Yeah, she said, folding her overcoat on the back of the chair. But I can come with you later, if you want.

No, it's fine.

She sat down beside him, studied his sleep-hanged face.

She said softly: It's been 20 years, y'know.

I know.

And you're sure you'll be fine? To go alone, I mean.

He nodded.

Well. I'm glad you're pulling through with it this time. She placed a hand over his bare knee, clenched it. She'll be really happy to see you, y'know.

I don't know about that.

Ray, c'mon. She's your mother.

His wife let go and stood up. The circle of his kneecap felt cold.

She was walking into the kitchen and called out: You want a cuppa?

Yeah, thanks. I might have a shower first.

She didn't respond. He stood up and left the room.

They didn't speak much throughout the morning. She was locked away in the study, working, occasionally coming out for a cup of tea, or a phone call. He went outside for a cigarette and

to look again at the tree. In the back shed was a tyre with some rope. When Tom was younger he'd always meant to put the tyre up, or maybe build a ladder. He wanted to do something with that tree for Tom. But he'd never gotten around to it.

In the kitchen, Georgia lifted beetroot from a container. Hey, you want a sandwich?

No, thanks. I think I might get going.

Should you take her a cake or something?

They don't allow food.

Really?

Yeah.

His wife looked at him. She put the knife down on the plate and licked her finger and approached him. Are you sure you don't want me to come?

I'll be fine, really.

You don't look it.

Well.

Well what?

It's something I just want to do on my own.

I understand.

Her hand over his chest, the fingers tapping the collarbone.

What? she asked.

I don't know if it's the right thing to do.

You know it is.

It wasn't the right thing for her to do what she did to that woman and leave us for good.

Ray, it was a long time ago.

That doesn't change anything.

Listen, said Georgia, in a soft tone. You said once Tom was old enough, he should know. He has a right, don't you think? Tom asking all these questions and you wanting to be honest with him is what encouraged you, remember?

Ray gently nodded.

I want to try get back in time to pick Tom up from school.

He said he was getting the train with some friends.

Well can you text him and say I'll pick him up?

Okay. But he's stubborn.

Ray rubbed his eye with a knuckle. He gets it from me, he said.

I know.

Georgia kissed him on the cheek. She held the back of his neck. She was close to him, but knew his mind was lost. I know everything will be okay.

He nodded, kissed her back

Good luck, she said. Don't forget a present.

After driving for half an hour, he realised he'd forgotten about the present. He wondered about the point of getting her a gift. What material item makes up for 20 years of absence? At the next exit on the highway, he turned off, and drove along until he came across the first shopping complex he saw.

It was an outer suburbs strip mall. Standard shops, a small parking lot. He entered the complex, looked about. Passing the food court, he saw young families at the tables. Babies crying. Prams being rocked back and forth by disconsolate parents. A young man in a high-vis shirt standing at the McDonald's line, arguing with a woman dressed in a tracksuit. An elderly couple outside Michele's drinking coffee. A thin cleaning woman collecting trays chocked with rubbish. Teenagers wearing snapbacks and baggy V-necks with tiny backpacks. Over the chatter and shuffle the sound of bland, instrumental mall music. The musty smell of human heat.

He wandered into a section with jewellery stores. He knew he couldn't buy her jewellery, or anything too expensive. In the window of one store he looked at his murky reflection for a moment and then looked passed that at a watch clipped around a dummy's hand. He entered the shop.

A woman a few years older than him approached. She wore all black and her face was pampered heavily with foundation. Hi, how ya going? she asked, smiling.

Good, thanks, said Ray.

Anything you're after in particular?

Ray pointed over to the watch behind the window.

That watch looks good.

Yes, it's a Burnham's. Brown leather.

How much?

The asking price is 250, but we can do it for 225.

And if I pay cash?

The smile vanished from the woman's powdered face.

It's still 225.

Um... He patted his back pocket for his wallet. He exhaled.

Okay, he said. I'll take it.

The smile returned. As if drawn up by string.

He spent the remainder of the car ride thinking whether or not the watch was too expensive. It sat on the seat next to him in a square white box. A silver bow tied around. He forgot to get a card.

When he arrived at the prison there was a line of cars waiting at the gate. They moved in slowly, the boom gate flung up, dropped down. He looked at the walls of the prison and the coils of barbed wire aligning the top. The wire looked like the orb spider's web, only larger.

He was let in, drove to an empty space. He watched other men, other women, some families, exit their cars and cross up to the entrance. He thought about when he spoke to his mother last week. When she heard his voice she was shocked, but then the reality of the situation set in. The flat crepitation of her voice. The sinking feeling in Ray's stomach. He said that he was visiting on her birthday. She said she would believe it when she saw it and hung up the phone.

Inside he asked for his mother: Jenny Mohr, 59. A plump guard told him to approach the counter and remove any provisions for inspection. The guard searched the box with the watch. Lifted up the paper sheath underneath, his fingers wiping the surface, digging into the corners. The guard put the lid back on the box, pushed it to Ray and said it was suitable for him to enter. The guard then said he had 20 minutes. As Ray walked away, he could sense the guard's cold, lingering stare. As if the guard was disgusted by Ray and heeded the watch as a bad omen.

He was shown into a room with glass barriers and seats in front of them. On the other side of the barriers were seats for the prisoners. The last time he'd been here they used old black telephones. The benches of the barriers were empty save for a radio monitor. He was told to sit at barrier eight.

Ray sat, put the box on the bench. He waited. There was very little noise in the room. Within the barrier, it was intimate. He couldn't see or hear any of the other visitors. The

bench was a linoleum blue, soft to the touch. His palms were sweaty, and he left a smudge mark of handprint on the bench, which vanished almost instantly.

A buzzer rang. A door shucked open. The women piled in, sat at their respective places. Then his mother appeared.

She had frayed blond hair, almost colourless. Gaunt face with a sharp nose. Similarities in each other's eyes, both meek and shunned. Her skin lacked sunlight and when she placed her candlewhite arms on the bench they were hairless and almost childlike. You actually showed, she said.

He stared at her.

When she was a girl she'd lost hearing in her right ear. He always remembered she spoke and listened with her head angled to the left. Now, she did the same motion. He thought of the house he grew up in, the way her voice had sounded within its walls. Look at you, she said. You've aged well.

So have you.

She snuffed. No, I haven't. Nobody in here has.

The glass between them was that clear it looked as if it wasn't there at all. Her voice came through the speaker, sounding like she did on the phone last week.

Well, she said. How're you?

I'm good. I'm well.

How's Georgia?

Fine.

She hesitated. And how's your boy, Tom?

Fine, too.

Her appearance so drab she seemed to blend in the dun background of the barrier.

How old's he now?

He's 12, just started high school.

She nodded. Her mouth ajar, eyes furrowed tightly. She was lost for a moment, as if trying to mould the accurate image of Tom in her mind.

He looks a lot like Georgia, said Ray. Black hair, same round face.

She opened her eyes. He's good?

He's smart. Smarter than me.

Her face was hard. Eyes wandered up to the ceiling. He sensed her thoughts drifting again. He slid the box over on the bench.

Happy birthday, he said.

Her eyes careened gently from the roof down onto the box.

He looked around. How do I, um, how should...?

You give it to them when you leave.

Right.

What is it?

Let it be a surprise.

Can't have surprises in here.

He paused.

It's a watch.

She slowly smiled. They let you bring that in?

He nodded.

Ray, as soon as I put that on, it'll be gone.

He placed his fingers on the lid of the box.

I appreciate it, Ray. But give it to Georgia, or... Tom.

You sure?

Yes, I'm sure.

They shared a silence. She stared at him, at how his face had aged. She leaned forward, resting elbows on the table. The left ear lowered further down to the receiver. She spoke:

So, what else have you been doing for 20 years?

He let go fiddling the box and straightened on the chair. Well...

In 30 years you must have done some things.

I've bought a house, still paying it off.

You finish university?

Yes.

And did you get into publishing?

You remembered I was doing that?

She nodded.

Well, yeah. I did. I worked at a couple of magazines for a few years. Now I own a boutique.

A what?

It's like a speciality store. Sell books, stationary. Paper. That kind of thing.

And do you like it?

I'm my own boss and it pays the bills so I can't complain.

There was another silence. She wouldn't take her eyes from his. This tension was building up inside her. He could almost feel it burning on the glass. She looked at the clock above the doorway. You've got about 10 minutes left to tell me what else you've done with your life.

I know, it's just—

You don't want to?

No, I do. I'm trying to take everything in.

You think this is hard?

Well. Yes. Don't you?

She sighed, the tension lingered in her tone: What does Georgia do?

She's an editor.

And are you looking after her?

I like to think she looks after me.

Her composure dictated his mood, his words. She was wavelike in her emotions. Rising, crashing, sifting with things more complicated than sadness or joy. He found her impossible to decipher.

What's he like? she said.

Tom? He's quiet. Well mannered.

No I meant, what does he like, what are his interests?

Oh, right. He's great at footy. Plays every Saturday morning. He reads a lot, even more than Georgia.

He likes books?

Yeah.

She nodded, warmly.

And do you two talk much?

Well. I love him, and he loves me. But we're worlds apart, y'know?

She shook her head.

Yeah, Ray, I know.

Ray shuffled in the seat.

Has he got a girl?

Not yet, no.

Soon, though.

Soon.

He smiled, expecting her to reciprocate. But she paled, her bottom lip trembled.

Would you ever bring him in here so I can see him?

Ray stopped, held breath. He didn't respond. She was starting to slowly shake. It could have been either anger or fear.

No, you wouldn't, she said. You haven't been in here for 20 years so why start now? You're not here to bridge a gap between me and your family. You wouldn't start now, Ray. Does he even know why I'm in here? That I exist?

He knows you're in here.

Does he know why?

No... And it was only recently we told him.

Why now? she demanded.

Because Georgia and I wanted to wait until he was old enough to understand.

She was holding back a cry, a fit. Cold eyes that would not leave him seethed with rage.

And I want to know—I deserve to know—why you didn't come sooner?

He leaned back on the bench. It squeaked. He put on elbow on the table and ran a hand through his hair and didn't have an answer.

I don't know, he said, finally.

You what?

I don't know. I've got this weird thing, this strange weight in my head about you. It's a sick hatred. I can't make myself reconcile with you and I don't know who you are other than—

What?

I don't want to say it. I know that you were never a mother. You fucked up everything and left me when I was 16. I thought that was that.

His mother was breathing heavily now. Her iron-like eyes moved slowly.

And you think I don't think about that every day? You don't know the things I've seen in here. What's happened to the other women. You don't know. The mothers in here hurt more than anyone else. We don't forget. Some have tried. Some have actually tried to forget about their families because why waste your days mourning the best thing you've lost forever? There's... There's nothing.

Ray was silent. Then he looked up at her and said: Are you sorry?

Yes. I am. To her, her family, to your father, and to you. Today I'm 60. I don't care about a watch, or anything like that. I want my family. To see them. I want for them to forgive me and for you to forgive me as well.

Her eyes had been rapidly crossing over his. Her thin fingers quivered on the bench edge. Parts of her cheeks had flushed with crude, red blotches. She inhaled deeply, and as she breathed out, the redness softened. She cleared her throat. But, she said, softly. That decision is up to you.

Ray didn't say anything for a while. He was slumped in the seat. He thought about what it would be like if the glass wasn't here, if they could perhaps touch each other.

Then the buzzer rang and the guard called five more minutes.

She wiped a wrist under her nose, then pushed the palm of her hand into her eye. They wasted three of the five minutes in silence. Then his mother said: When will you see Tom?

Now. I'm getting him from school.

Can I ask you a favour?

What?

When you've made your decision, do you think you could bring him in?

What?

If you decide to forgive me, could you please let me see him?

I don't know.

She pleaded with him. Please, Ray.

Ray glanced at the clock and then back at his mother.

I'll see, he said.

Will you?

Yes. When I think it's right for him.

When you think it's right to forgive me?

I'll see.

The buzzer sounded, the guard called time. Ray stood, but his mother remained seated.

It's the same for him, isn't it?

Because Ray was standing he couldn't respond in the speaker. His mother looked up at him.

It's the same as me being dead, right? she said.

Ray didn't respond.

She looked to the doorway, then stood.

Please, she said. Please think about—

But the receiver cut out. She mouthed words of silence. She stared bleakly at him, and this image would be all he'd think about on the drive home.

She turned away, walked off, followed by a line of soundless prisoners.

In his car he took the watch out and put it on his wrist. He watched people stand around, smoking cigarettes, get into their cars, drive off onto the highway and vanish.

He looked on the dashboard for his cigarettes. Then he patted his pockets. He forgot he left them at home.

A family passed his car, he looked at them in the rear view mirror. The father was very young. He held a baby at his chest, and with his free hand, had his toddler tied to a lead. The toddler would drift off, stumble. Ray watched the lead lengthen, then draw taut. The toddler sidled, the father tugged the lead back. And the child slowly approached him.

About the author: Jack Forbes is a 22-year-old writer living in Melbourne's western suburbs. In 2011, he was the winner of Queensland's Somerset Novella competition, for *The Settling*, and in 2012, the state winner for *Potter's Field*. In March, 2016, his story "Airport," was published in Issue 13 of *Tincture Journal*. He has a Bachelor of Arts from Monash University, with a major in literature.