

Stepmother.

THEY PICKED ME UP in their new car. It smelt of leather conditioner and perfume. Hers. French. Thick. She stunk, as my mother liked to put it, *like a fuckin' pole cat*. Everything about this woman, it was made clear to me, was to be despised. Everything, especially her expensive secretions. It was Madame Rochas, I think, and I secretly liked it. It smelt like the David Jones Christmas catalogue. It smelt like the holidays.

They didn't come to the door; my mother didn't go out. Their arrival was signalled by a single, sharp beep. The car, black and shiny as a leech, sat on the cracked concrete driveway, revving its engine like it couldn't wait to get away. It didn't look right in our scrappy, wire-fenced yard. The two Rottweilers were circling, sniffing its tyres. I could see her face through the tinted windows, nervously watching the dogs, and watching me as I approached. The dogs barrelled up to me, almost slamming my knees out from under me with their joyful heft. I gave them each a nuzzle before sliding into the cream leather embrace of the back seat.

Immediately, she pulled a packet of Wet Ones out of the glove box and handed them to me.

I looked back and saw my mother's backlit figure through the half-open side door. Hair, a halo of black static. Sucking her teeth.

My father fiddled with the stereo. Iggy Pop's 'Lust for Life' came on. This was Dad's driving jam. Track six on the *Trainspotting* soundtrack. It was actually my CD. My older brother had given it to me, at my request, for my birthday. It was perhaps a precocious choice for an eleven-year-old, but I'd seen the movie with my cousins and liked the sounds. She had seized it, seconds after I slid off the wrapping, and examined the cover before handing it to my father with a look. It was theirs now. A special soundtrack for weekend getaways in their German sports car. They showed me the moonroof. It was different to a sunroof, which was what my mother's car had. A plane of grey glass separated you from the sky.

It was chilly. They were in their smart casuals. My father in a taupe windbreaker with lots of zippers and empty pockets. She was encased in a crop coat of black rabbit fur, and more gold than usual. Dragging the tips of her red enamel fingers over the contours of a map.

I never knew how to act with them so most of the time I kept quiet. I felt like a spy behind enemy lines. My silence made them (and her, especially her) even more nervous. I was surly and antisocial. Or *withdrawn* might have been the word she used. When they spoke to me it was loud, over-the-shoulder and over-articulated. The same way I'd heard them talk to Ngoc, their Vietnamese cleaner. When they spoke to each other in my presence it was all whispers. They slipped between the two modes like ventriloquists.

Stepmother.

The sun visor on her side was down and in the little mirror I could see her tits. *She wears them like they're on sale*, my mother had said. *Thrust to the front of the shelf. Overripe.* They were permanently festooned with gold pendants. A Buddha from Cambodia. An ornate crucifix from her dead mother. She'd wear up to seven at a time, all clattering and glittering in her cleavage. The size and texture of her breasts fascinated me. They'd spent a lot of summers exposed on foreign beaches, basted in Reef oil. The loosening brown crust of her décolletage contained the globes of soft tissue, like the skin of a baked dessert contains the custard. I thought that maybe breasts would be a nice thing to have. A flesh mantle to protect the heart.

'So, the big One-Two!' my father said, referring to my recent birthday. 'Almost a teenager.'

I nodded. Almost.

By this stage the CD had been changed. It was George Michael singing 'Freedom'. Another one of my father's favourite highway tunes.

To our left, there was the cold expanse of Lake George. Of all the scenery on the road to Canberra, that's the stretch that I always remember. How suddenly the void of that lake appears. It's unquiet country. To the right, a steep bluff, crowded with dark trunks of ironbark gums and grey boulders, fringed with shivering grass. A burnt-out car body. A high fence of barbed wire. Everything silver and black.

There was a storm coming. When we stepped out of the car you could feel the electricity in the air. We had spent an hour following the maddening concentric loops of the nation's capital

before we found the turn-off to our hotel. Behind a dense hedge, it was as hushed and guarded as the embassies that surrounded it. Clocks behind the front desk indicated the time in ten different countries. The receptionist's badge glinted. It smelt the way that hotels smell.

You could hear muffled claps of thunder outside. By the time we got to our suite, heavy rain was pelting the windows. I sat on the quilted bedspread of one of the two single beds in my room. The one closest to the door, the one I'd chosen. My twin room was adjacent to their double, separated by a door that locked on their side. They had the minibar and the television. I was happy to be alone but I wanted a Snickers.

'Can I have this?' I made my way into their room and opened the minibar to find the chilled chocolate bars, lined up in size order in their creaseless wrappers. I pulled one out. 'Dad? Can I?'

She was at the window cracking the neck of a baby bottle of Gordon's, preparing a couple of G and Ts. They always had one at this time. A cigarette between her fingers, she looked at the chocolate bar in my hand, then at my father. Rolled her eyes.

My father's face contorted with pity and disgust. 'You don't need it, sweetie.'

The National Gallery, monumental ode to brutalist concrete, surrounded by acres of car park. A banner unfurled down its side announced the arrival of *The Queen's Pictures*, the big mid-year exhibition. A selection of paintings from the Windsor family vault would be gracing the colonies with their presence for three months.

Stepmother.

The two of them walked ahead of me, her heels making a hasty racket past the Yolngu log coffins and through several rooms of Papunya canvases, seething with the colours of the desert. Eventually we reached the antechamber of the main exhibition space and found our place at the end of the queue, a heaving congregation of quiet bodies, rain-spattered jackets and damp beanies, inching down the corridor towards the exhibition entrance. There were two invigilators at the door to the gallery, one manning the grunting ticket machine, the other standing at one end of a velvet rope, unhooking it periodically to let punters through in clusters. We waited our turn. My father's arm around her waist. All of us shivering, the wet soles of our shoes streaking the floor.

The faces of angels. Virgin and child. Monarch in profile. From the workshop of. Attributed to. Virgin and child. A woman, carrying a man's head on a platter. Looking pleased with herself. Three strange, Flemish children, dark eyes, skin like dough. Cherries and small oranges. Man with fur collar and medallions. Cleft chin, flat plane of burgundy behind. A king. A merchant. Two women and a man adoring the holy newborn. Virgin and child. The women's hands clasped in prayer. Virgin and child. The man's fingers, pincer'd, slightly camp, delivering a blessing. The baby cocks one leg up. Virgin and child. Sometimes soft, rendered fleshy, drapery spilling from the body of Mary. Blue sky behind. Others, flat. Sideways, elongated, Byzantine. Peeling gilt, angels stuffed in the corners. The faces of angels. Virgin and child. Psyche exposed on a rock. Two nymphs and a satyr. The worshippers of Dionysus. Women with blood in their teeth. Animal skins. Panels for the decoration of a palace interior. Albrecht Dürer. The muscular faces

of the Black Forest. Death, always, stuffed in a corner. The faces of angels. The Italians with their saints and the British with their nobility. Mermaid feeding her young. There are seven of them, all boys. She has a breast for each of them. Seven breasts. All suckling. The frothing ocean. Looking pleased with herself. Virgin and child. This one: Christ child, a beefy suburban toddler. The kind of kid who would hassle the neighbour's cat. Mary's firm bicep, visible under her sleeve.

We moved from room to room, like insects devouring a carcass. I was fascinated by the portraits of European noblewomen. It was their enhanced silhouettes that held particular appeal. The rooms were chronologically ordered and every one revealed a new stage in the evolution of corsetry, beginning with the rigid triangles of the Elizabethans through to the cinched hourglass of the Victorians. I was prepubescently potato-shaped and I regretted not living in an era of stiff bodices and long skirts. I was reminded, on a daily basis, both of my so-called girl-ness and my failure at executing girl-ness to the satisfaction of other so-called girls. 'Womanhood' was an as yet remote and compelling proposition: among other things it seemed as though woman-ness was something you could put on and take off. It had forms that were standardised and replicable. Looking at rooms full of corsetted waists, I felt some kind of relief. I wondered what it would be like to have an exoskeleton like that. To always be so upright, to be so held, to relinquish your form to that whalebone embrace.

She was walking ahead of me. Having shed her rabbit fur, her flesh was uncontained. The black bodysuit was truncated by a leather skirt, taut over the mound of her arse. She would pause

Stepmother.

every time we passed a religious icon, sometimes going so far as to raise her hands to her mouth in something close to a gesture of prayer. My father was fond of the more vanilla Gainsboroughs and any picture with a seafaring theme. He looked at the tall ships with the same captivated longing as I looked at the Victorian silhouettes. A mutual tendency to indulge in period-themed escape fantasies is one of a few things my father and I have always had in common.

We spent almost as long in the gift shop as we did in the exhibition. They bought a framed print of a Turner for the study. I selected a couple of postcards. Andrea del Sarto's *Red Virgin*. Vincenzo Catena's *Salome* (for my mother). A Gainsborough of a woman on a swing, suspended in a green cave of summer foliage. And from the workshop of Giulio Romano, the glorious seven-titted mermaid feeding her young.

'You can't let her go swimming unsupervised, Marcus. She's a child!'

I was already in my costume, my goggles on my head, ready to tear off down the corridor in search of the hotel swimming pool. They were dressing for dinner. She was sweeping a curling iron through her fine, copper hair. I could smell it burning.

'She could swim before she could walk, darling. She'll be fine.'

She pursed her lips and turned back to the mirror. 'It's not safe. She should stay in the room.'

I saw my chance, grabbed my spare key and made a break for it. My heart was pounding. Halfway down the corridor I turned, sure she was behind me, reaching out to grab me, drag me back and lock me in.

The pool was a slender, utilitarian rectangle intended for executive lap-swimmers. I got in their way.

‘This isn’t a kiddy pool,’ a red-faced man growled at me when I was turning somersaults in his lane. *Kiddy*. There was some malevolence in that word and the way he said it. I retreated to the edge and hung there for a while. He kept glaring at me and shaking his head.

I was always looking for new ways to be transformed by water. I wanted, so desperately, to be a water-dwelling creature, for this to be my natural habitat. I wanted to be able to breathe under the surface, to see down there as clearly as I could on land. I wanted to live a weightless life, always floating. This is the magic of swimming: it relieved me of the weight of my own flesh. In water I was something else.

I figured out that if you exhale all of the air from your lungs and hold it out, you just sink. Right to the bottom, like a stone. I did this, over and over. I wanted to see how long I could stay down there. Resting on my back, looking up at the lap swimmers as they pounded along the surface. Or creeping along the edges like a salamander.

I must have stayed in the water for three hours. The sun went down outside. The trees that crowded outside the long window gradually lost their texture. Faded to black. Until all I could see was a pane of glass with nothing but night behind it, and my own reflection, floating in the empty pool.

When I got back to the room there was a note scrawled in my father’s handwriting. They expected to be back late. I should order dinner from room service. It was almost ten o’clock.

Stepmother.

I ordered chicken schnitzel and chips and started watching a late movie. It was about a small town in Vermont or Maine or one of those picturesque and leafy American states where horror movies always seem to happen. This small town had been plagued by a series of mysterious deaths. Massacred bodies had been found in the surrounding woods. It turned out that it was the trees that were responsible. The woods were cursed, the trees came alive at night and killed anyone who happened to be wandering through them. The policeman's daughter has strayed from the school dance. Some strange compulsion draws her into the woods. She goes deeper and deeper; suddenly a storm strikes out of nowhere. Her diaphanous party frock is drenched, clinging to her like a membrane. She snaps out of her trance and realises she's in a place where she doesn't belong. She panics. Runs. Can't find the path. The trees stir. Stretch out their papier-mâché limbs. Grab at her. One tears off her dress. She's screaming, running, wriggling out of their grasp. Then one long arm scoops down and lifts her off the ground. She's screaming, kicking her legs, there's mud all over her. There's a close-up: the tree that's holding her extends one pointed finger. Slowly, with relish and precision, it drives this finger through the girl's torso, exits through her flat teenage navel, the music reaches a crescendo, blood spurts everywhere. She screams one more time, her body shakes, and she finally falls limp and silent.

At this point room service knocked on the door and I went to claim my schnitzel. I sat cross-legged in a hotel dressing-gown, my hair still wet and smelling of chlorine, and ate, relishing every mouthful of insipid, ketchup-drenched meat. I watched the movie to the end. There were a few more deaths. There was no way of

breaking the curse, which had been laid by a witch who had been hanged there in Ye Olden Days. So they burnt the forest down. But the last frame showed a tiny sapling, breaking the blackened crust of the earth, its tender branches twitching.

After that came infomercials and relentless ads for phone sex. It was after midnight. I rummaged for things to amuse myself with. I got my postcards from the gallery out and looked at them. I opened the minibar a couple of times just to rest my tormented gaze on the Snickers I was not allowed to eat.

I'd noticed her toiletries bag earlier on. She'd left it gaping on the dresser. I had glimpsed into it briefly, but didn't have the courage to stick my hand in. It had sat there all night in my peripheral vision, daring me to upend its contents. In the end I couldn't resist. I fully opened its zippered maw and looked inside.

There was a bottle of Madame Rochas. I sniffed at the tip of the atomiser. That smell was her presence distilled. Suddenly she felt nearby. My stomach contracted.

There was powder, lipstick and frosted eyeshadows that glimmered like fish scales. The chalky, sweet smell of cosmetics. Different creams, all for specialised areas. Hand cream, foot cream, face cream, body lotion, eye cream, day cream, night cream. Ear buds and razor blades. A packet of menstrual pads.

Periods had been thoroughly explained to me but I was still mystified by the finer mechanics. Exactly how much blood were we talking about? Did it pour out like piss or was it more of a drip? How many of these things were you meant to go through in a day? I pulled one out and unfolded it. It was like a big, puffy cotton tongue. I wanted to know what it felt like to wear. Would she

Stepmother.

notice if one went missing? No, I decided. I retreated into my own room for a private experiment, making sure to leave everything exactly as I had found it.

I peeled the backing off the adhesive strip and slipped it into the gusset of my knickers. I looked in the mirror. Under the mauve cotton, there was suddenly an unnaturally large mound. I squeezed the soft bulk between my thighs. The sensation of an unfamiliar object in contact with my crotch was unexpected and compelling.

I had been a precocious and regular masturbator for several years at this point. As my basic manual skill set solidified, I entered a more experimental phase – always looking for objects or textures to incorporate. I'd discovered that a bunched-up handful of cling film, used in the bath, produced one kind of sensation, and the neck of a hot water bottle, the warm bladder pressed against belly, produced another. Spa jets and massaging shower heads were especially excellent. But this pad – the way it looked and felt, packing out my undies with a visible bulge – that was an entirely new kind of feeling. I lingered to admire myself in the mirror for a moment. Then crawled under covers, lay on my stomach, squeezed and contracted my legs rhythmically around stiff cotton packing until I felt that release, that rush of warmth. Every tiny muscle in the core of my body relaxed. I fell asleep.

Through the darkness, I could hear their voices. On the other side of the thick wall. There was heat in their voices. Were they fighting or fucking? It was difficult to tell.

My eyes flickered open, just long enough to see the time on the clock radio. It was after four in the morning.

The noises continued for a while. It could have been an hour or it could have been five minutes. They reached a peak and then, abruptly, fell away into silence.

I didn't hear the door open. But I remember, all of a sudden, being aware of another person in the room.

They sat down on the empty single bed next to mine. I heard the springs creak, heard the rasp of their hands on the starchy fabric of the quilt. Smells. Not the smells of my world, but of another: the hot breath of whisky and nicotine. Sweat, damp and Madame Rochas.

I could feel her presence in the room like a sudden drop in pressure. She was watching me. Willing me to open my eyes and look back at her. Perhaps she wanted someone to bear witness to the state she was in. I opened my eyes just a fraction. Through the slits I could see her dark outline. The smudged hollows of her eyes. Her lips still caught in half a snarl, her teeth underneath, her breath sifting through them. Her hair was wet; it hung off her scalp, clung to her neck and shoulders. That was the other smell. Rain. I could smell water and mud on her, like she'd been dredged up from somewhere deep.

I fastened my eyes shut and lay perfectly still, hunched in a fetal apostrophe. She kept her eyes on me. I could feel them. I even thought, at one stage, that I felt her hand reach out for me. Not touching, just hovering above the crook of my torso. As though touch were not necessary for her to draw me into the field of her body. Something moved up the length of my spine. The low-frequency hum of her presence, her slow breathing in the dark, slowly engulfed me.

Stepmother.

I lay there, frozen in sub-wakeful awareness, for a timeless stretch. I finally heard the rasp of sheets and the creak of her body shifting on the mattress. I opened my eyes a crack and saw her dark outline in the bed next to mine.

When I woke there was sharp winter sunlight pouring through the blinds. I looked to the bed beside me to find it empty. Perfectly made-up, as if it had never been touched.

My father was pounding on the door. 'Check-out time!' he was hollering from the adjoining room. 'Get up, lazybones.'

I shuffled past him on the way to the bathroom. He had folded everything back into his navy overnight bag. He put on his cap and his windbreaker. He looked tired.

The benches in the bathroom were totally clear. Nothing of hers or his remained. There was just my toothbrush, waiting where I'd left it. When I went to the toilet I realised I was still wearing the menstrual pad. It emerged from between my legs unmarked, the only evidence of wear being the crease that had formed down the middle, where its shape had moulded to mine. I ripped it out and threw it away.

The dresser had been cleared too. Her toiletries bag was gone. There was just my father, his overnight bag at his feet, his hands in his lap, sitting by the window.

I asked him, 'Where is she?'

He said nothing. He didn't look at me.