

The Washing of Iniquity

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Morning, mango tree, mirror on the veranda; the cheap makeup clogs up her thin eyelashes. Weatherboard crackles and we wear white always, long white shirts over our little kilograms of pain. Camille hates it, maybe because she's French. There is the road and the cars and running water and the smells of bleach and soap so strong they have stopped burning. Camille wears makeup so she can't cry. Last night they took this girl Charlotte to Karalla House in Ipswich because she slapped one of the sisters during prayer and cut up her wrists in the bathrooms with a razor. Camille is now sure they will kill Charlotte's baby. That's what they do at Karalla. Camille thinks they will kill everyone's baby and she walks around with her stomach all sucked in like she's three months not nine months. She mutters something, about her two weeks. 23rd January 1967. It will be a summer baby. This morning, when they kill Charlotte's baby, all the makeup in the world won't stop her from crying. The laundry hums.

Camille and I are next to each other with Sunlight Soap on our arms. It is 32 degrees today and we all have our hair tied on top of our heads and sweat runs in thick rivers along the back of our necks. Camille keeps looking out the window for William because they have all the documents to get married now. Her stomach is up on the edge of the metal sink. They had a house at Toowong and William was a plumber and they had nearly 200 pounds saved but they still took her to the watch-house and they still took her to the laundry. We watch the boys from the private school in their blazers walking up the burning hill in the yellow sunlight. They are my age; they are a year younger than Camille. We eye them with burning gazes through the frosted louvers.

One of the girls who is supposed to be hanging up the sheets outside screams and falls into the grass and clutches her stomach, silhouetted by the firey sunlight. Camille watches her with glazed eyes as the sisters walk slowly down the slope and someone dials the phone in the hallway. There is blood on the grass. Camille picks up one of the thick hotel blankets from the basket and spreads it out over her own stomach. Then suddenly she looks at me with bright shock - there is colour on the white material, the red colour of 20 dollars. She shakes her head at nothing. "I can't... I can't. If they find me with it they'll kill my baby," she says. I think of Charlie and how he touched my hair and how he told me he would come and find me and all the months I waited and I take it and I am crying and I say, "I'm going to find Charlie." I place the note in my underpants.

The splinters of sharpened light disappear through the broken boards and there is only the soft sound of the Hills Hoist and the shadow of the sheets outside against the moonlight. Camille breathes heavily and her hands make red lines on her stomach; she rolls her eyes back into her head and groans primitively. "I can't," she whispers again, crying mascara-black tears, "I can't have him now. They have to put the documents through first!" I look at her, my figure shrouded in a towel still, the glistening drops of cold shower-water reflecting light across my naked body. "Don't let me scream, don't let me scream or they'll come," she says, each breath infected with acidic hysteria. "Put your hand in my mouth, Alice, don't let me..." She takes my fingers and pushes them into her open mouth, her warm saliva burning my blisters.

A train slides through the night far away, the sound of its empty whistle slippery in the nothingness. "Tell me if he's there!" she screams, now exhausted. "Tell me he's there!" The lights from the hallway fill my eyes and illuminate the empty path outside. A possum hesitates, its eyes caught in the reflection, gnawed bar of Sunlight Soap in its claws. Camille screams his name as they take her out to the ambulance. The football is on and the sounds echo through the city. My bare feet absorb the sticky-liquid which covers her bed. It's so clear tonight you can see Mount Coot-tha.

I visit Camille with Father Haggerty on Sunday morning. Camille is very pale and very smiley on the pillow, eating ice-cream from a little paper container. Like her, the ice-cream is white white white. Father blesses her and then goes to some of the other ladies who are in the ward. "Did you get to see the baby?" I ask. Camille looks at me with a kind of funny expression like she's going to start laughing. "No," she says, suddenly frowning, and looking slightly perplexed. "They tied me down. Right down to the bed with ropes around my wrists and ropes and ropes around my ankles. And when he came out the nurse took him and wrapped him up and the sister held my head down against the pillow to stop me from seeing him."

I look out the window and there is a big green park. The woman in the next bed has her little baby on her chest and he is asleep, so asleep he could be dead. "How do you know he's a boy then?" I ask, looking down at her again.

"I just know," she says. She looks at the ice-cream where it is melting down her finger. "They took him, you know, I signed the papers and everything. When I told William he slapped me, right across the face. But they told me the baby would die otherwise, that they couldn't save him and it just felt so right and I felt so happy. I tell you Alice I just feel like laughing, like laughing all the time," she says. And she starts to laugh, so loudly that everyone turns to look at her, but there are tears, tears and tears and tears until there are just tears. And someone calls a nurse.

Back at All Saints, the sister says I look awfully white and lets me lie down for a while before I go back to work. They locked the gate of the big high fence when we came back, like every time. I used to wonder why they needed a fence, a big silver sharp fence to keep us all inside like funny little animals at the zoo. I sit up with the most queer smile and climb out the window. And when I am on the grass no one is there and so I walk over and I climb all the way up into the mango tree like I used to with Charlie. And I tell the tree a secret which I have never told anyone ever and that is that Charlie is never going to come and find me because my mother said on the phone he didn't know who I was! I laugh and the tree smells like wet soil. I laugh like Camille. And then I step out onto the hot hot metal of the fence and I let go of the tree branch and I scream like Camille. And I fall onto the pavement with a big crack on my back and everything is silent.

And the sister comes and stands over me and asks me the funniest questions like how many fingers she is holding up. And I tell her I have twenty dollars and I pull down my underpants in the street and hold it out. She holds my arms down and tells me not to move. I will not be held down Sister Beatrice! I throw my arms around everywhere and I can see the private school boys watching me like big black crows with their nothing-eyes. And there is the smell of soap and bleach and the leaves of the mango tree above me and the shade of All Saint's and the sound of the Hills Hoist and the hot bitumen and the voices, more and more and more, and the red of the blood and the sun. Big yellow sun! And everything is so soft - I laugh, I laugh and laugh and laugh and I don't stop laughing. And they are taking me to hospital and telling me my baby is dead and that I am dying and there is surgery and blood and there is a tiny, unmoving bundle on my chest that no one is holding my head away from. And I am drowning forever in an ocean of laughter, swimming towards the surface to gasp at the air of tears. But I can never seem to find it. Always so bright, shimmering above me.

I cannot breathe.