

The Real Thing

Our family's never been very good at 'family.' When my nephew was conceived my sister and I weren't even speaking, some silly argument about my Northwestern Wildcats t-shirt she'd borrowed when she was sixteen which came back filthy weeks later, torn with a smudge across its logo. At the time she said it was an accident, that I was making too much of it, that the stain would probably come right out if I took it to the dry cleaners, their chemicals able to dissolve almost anything (though it never did), besides which what right did I have to be upset when decades earlier I'd borrowed her copy of *The Snow Queen* without even asking and then had lost it and hadn't even apologized? That was the same year that Mum chucked out our Fair Isle jumpers, just after we got back from Chicago, eight months into our 18 month stay, departing from the bitter chill of the northern winter into the morass of a scorching summer daze, jetlagged and distraught, the searing heat of a Melbourne February no place for woollen cable knits even if they had been handmade by our grandmother. Days later Mum said she wished she hadn't done it, that they might have made nice keepsakes she'd realized, but by then Dad was well and truly dead, his lithe body rigormortized into its own semi rigid phase and it was too late to change her mind: the rubbish had been collected that morning.

My nephew cries intermittently; it starts as a gentle squeak but rapidly intensifies until my sister puts him on her breast. If her breast isn't available he can be temporarily bought off with a little finger to suck (he hasn't graduated to dummies yet), but that only lasts so long. If he's really hungry, he'll soon want the

real thing. I wash my hands extra thoroughly before inserting my pinkie upside-down into his mouth, not wanting to overwhelm his small newborn baby senses with the aroma of chopped garlic or to spoil his pristine palate with the flavour of spaghetti bolognese or whatever else I have prepared for dinner that evening, shocked that this can even be allowed to happen: "Why have they let you out of the hospital?" I ask him as his determined tongue works at my unyielding fingertip. "You're way too young to be left alone with the likes of us." His tiny body rallies around my finger, minute fists clenched against my fist, his head cradled in the palm of my other hand, fiercely latched on the way we all fiercely latch on, grasping for nourishment, ever grateful for those hands. And then even though his stomach is apparently full of gas, his pained writhings attesting to the fact, he pulls his head away as though in complete agreement and projectile vomits right across my shirt.

I think that's what Dad would have called a definite phase transition. For him everything was molecules and combinations of molecules, the ability of matter to shift from gas or liquid to solid form, and then sometimes back again, holding particular fascination. "In some instances you can't even tell which state is which," I remember him saying. Glaciers being his favourite example, the way they could slip down a mountainside like slow moving treacle, looking for all the world as solid as brass.

Like Dad, the baby was touch and go for a while. First he took forever to move into the right position and then he got stuck. They waited for him to unstick himself, but

he didn't and then his heartbeat faltered. I felt like I was twelve years old again as I watched the heart rate monitor, staring into the dark, waiting for my father to re-emerge, the sounds of screaming audible off in the distance, then a nurse slamming the emergency button with the flat of her hand saying, we can't guarantee a good outcome here.

This is what happens when you're not paying attention, when the desire to please overtakes natural caution and suddenly you're pregnant or fat or skating on thin ice, the cheap satisfaction of immediate gratification outweighing your ability to see straight, to make sensible decisions, because it's all so new or delicious or your daughters are pleading with you *please, one last time* so that even though you know it's quite late in the season you might not get a chance to do it again for a while (and besides you're sick of them always saying that you're no fun), the tremendous consequences masked by the urgent flurry of it all like vapour lifting off a roiling sea.

Sometimes I still dream about Chicago: We might be carving pumpkins for Halloween, Dad showing us how to find the grain of the vegetable, using his pocket knife to dissect the eyes and teeth, explaining how everything has a natural direction or tendency (even seven kilo jack-o-lanterns); or it might be evening, the four of us sitting around on the couch sipping hot chocolates with marshmallows, Dad saying *ain't life grand* as candlelight flickers from the jack-o-lantern, casting great toothy shadows on the living room walls. Other times I might even dream about the duck pond. The snow will have dusted the park fantasy white and we'll be gliding around

in our thick parkas practicing skating backwards or performing our newly mastered half turns, laughing about how we'd never be able to do this in Australia, the weather never getting sufficiently cold, and I'll forget all about the softened ice (a freak accident, they said), how it was just waiting to break, that awful cracking sound, and then the sudden hole and Dad falling down in it.

My sister's husband left her at 29 weeks. He didn't love her any more, he said. That, and that she looked like she had a giant watermelon stuffed under her jumper. *Have you got a giant watermelon stuffed under there?* he said, laughing. His way of relieving the tension, as though it were funny, being estranged from your body by another body, something you were responsible for but not. Now she looks like a tired version of my sister who barely has the energy to make herself a cup of tea, let alone to argue with me. Mum and I hover around like nursemaids, fetching nappies and baby wipes, trying not to trip over each other as we get in each other's way. At night I coax myself to sleep by systematically not thinking about all the annoying things Mum's done throughout the day. Either that or I recite multiplication tables. This is called meditation, I've been told, the practice of clocking events in your minds' eye (*your thoughts are a moving stream*) then letting them go through to the keeper.

Dad's nickname for Mum was *firecracker*, a well earned epithet, though he mostly referred to her as *mother*, an almost offensively innocuous moniker, I realize now, yet when I raise it she gives me her wide-eyed blink as though she doesn't quite understand, the province of Dad and his peccadilloes remaining well and truly

off-limits. His pet name for me was *zigzag*, the hieroglyphic sign for 'water,' his favourite chemical substance (putatively for its life-giving properties, but also because of its multi phase potential, its transitions between liquid, solid and vapour often visible to the naked eye), though one time when my sister was really angry she said that Dad had only called me that because of my changeability. "He never knew what mood you'd be in when he got home."

"At least I had a nickname," I countered.

"More than one," she muttered under her breath.

This is how it goes with us, each quietly blaming the other, still. There are times when I think Dad would have appreciated the way his memory constantly plays about our lives and other times when I think he would have found it infuriating, an affront to common sense, as though in his absence we had moved backwards rather than forwards, any advances our family unit might have made towards firmness and solidity being slowly undone by our inability to accept the basic facts.

Mum tidies up the flower arrangements, stripping the dead flowers from the floral foam, then transposing the remaining stems into vases. "What are you doing?" I ask her, it being perfectly obvious what she's doing, but I don't think it's her place to be doing what she's doing, it being my sister's business to decide about her own flowers, though I know Mum hates flowers. Depressing, she always says (even though these are happy flowers, sent to celebrate the new baby, I remind her), ever

since Dad died and the house, musty from our abandonment, overnight filled with a dank mass of floral arrangements, so many they seemed to crowd every surface, fronted by their neat little cards all politely lamenting the tragedy of our loss.

When we left Chicago the snow had turned a dirty grey. As we took off in the taxi you could see the neon yellow patches where people had urinated on it and other places where they'd tossed their cigarette butts along with all their other rubbish like coke cans and beer bottles which were now wedged into the unsightly banks lining the footpaths and the sides of roads, like a cross section of human detritus captured in frozen form for the length of the season, until the weather warmed and the water melted it away.

I knew that wasn't what Dad would have wanted me to picture when he was explaining to me about 'transitional phase,' but in the vacuum of his absence it seemed that all this seasonal warming and melting and converting from one form to another, solid to liquid to gas, matter to spirit to soul, conceived to living to dead, was shaded by a cold miserable grey that refused to be brightened no matter how many pairs of brilliantly coloured gloves I donned or snug cheerful scarves I wound around my wound-up neck. That's when I started to hate winter.

But we hold onto things. The wrong things.

When my sister told me she was pregnant my first thought was 'no, not a winter baby.' I thought of the cold and grey bleak winter Chicago streets, of interminably long plane trips with Mum quietly weeping beside me when she thought we were asleep. How the air hostesses were particularly nice to us, bringing

us special drinks and colouring books, and then the sight of Dad's coffin being ferried to the terminal after we'd landed, the heat outside like an oven, rising in shimmers from the tarmac.

It wasn't until after the baby was actually born, one evening watching *Bewitched* on TV, that I found myself thinking again about the magic of snowflakes. Dad's colleagues had been obsessed with them, their hexagonal structure, always marvelling at their evanescent beauty, like shooting stars, unable to be grasped or held onto but spectacular in their flight, their rapid burst from being to nothingness powering the universe, as all beauty invariably does, harnessing cold the way solar panels store heat.

Scientists' children can be a sceptical lot. My sister returned to the chemist three times before she was able to accept what the little pink plus at the end of the plastic wand was telling her, that she, a dedicated consumer of the contraceptive pill, was pregnant. "The pill's only 99% effective," she reminded her husband. But as he later repeated to me, they were pretty good odds. Now she's having trouble deciding on the baby's name. Various options have been touted – Franklin, Milo, Jeremy – but as yet none of them have stuck, the idea that one could pluck a child's name out of thin air being ridiculous, she says. Mum is convinced the whole naming dilemma is simply a by-product of my sister's indecisiveness, *a chip off the old block*, she's fond of saying, whereas it's plain as day to everyone else that the issue is completely bound up with my sister's marriage breakdown and her ambivalence about the pregnancy

itself. "You might as well give me your two cents, she says, after Mum's run through yet another list of what she terms 'suitable appellations,' summarily knocking them down one after the other almost faster than I can articulate the sounds.

"Choose your own name then," I say, losing my patience, wishing she'd just done that in the first place, the quandary of babies names and birth registrations and whether or not one should be having children in the first place lying well beyond my jurisdiction. Plus she's just giving me the shits.

"Fine then. I will."

"Good."

"Good."

"Fine. Just don't call him after Dad."

In *The Snow Queen* an evil troll invents a magic mirror that reflects all beauty as ugliness. After the mirror shatters, the tiny splinters pierce peoples' bodies, freezing their hearts and blinding their souls to virtue. Even when my sister and I are bickering, the irony is not lost on me that what drives us most apart is the very thing that binds us most together, as though the cold of Dad's passing had entered our hearts preventing us from appreciating anything kind or generous about each other. We are attracted and repelled as magnets are attracted and repelled, our currents drawing and resisting in almost equal force depending on how we are positioned to one another. There's no clarity. It's not as though Dad's accident brought some truth to light. He is dead. That is all. This is what I mean when I say to her that *it is what it is*. No amount of honorary naming can redeem us. Refrozen

snowflakes are just ice. Water has no memory. The baby has come to us whole and unique, he is an entire separate person.

Mum whisks through the house, the tsk tsk of busywork, washing and cleaning and preparing special meals. Today, for example, she'll bake pumpkin pie, she announces. Her specialty. An unpalatable briny custard concoction she picked up in the Midwest. She walks from room to room asking if there's anything more we need from the shops – milk, apples, bread? – as alarm bells start ringing in my head as loudly as they did fifteen years ago when the dish was first showcased at my cousin's confirmation party. "Your mother's a lousy cook," my aunt said behind Mum's back. Except that Mum was behind her back and so heard every word. "The recipe had no sugar," Mum later argued in her defence, though she also added that Dad's family had always hated her and blamed her for everything so why shouldn't she speak her mind? "If it wasn't for you girls they wouldn't bother with me at all," she wailed. And then on the recipe again: "There must have been a mistake."

I was so embarrassed I hid in the back garden, taking off up the side of the house once the fracas had died down and I was sure everyone had returned to their canapés, the low simmer of small talk now firmly fixed on *poor Henrietta and her unfortunate children*, this being our extended family's default setting. What I have yet to reconcile however is why the intensity of the feelings continue to be as blistering today as when I was crouched beneath my aunt's camellia bush, swatting bees, trying not to cry. It makes me wonder if perhaps emotions don't also have phases

(though I would have hoped that this one might have passed by now) fixed in stable form like matter until their conditions are changed. Liquid doesn't just transform into vapour and then evaporate away. First it must be exposed to heat. "You know Mum, I hate your pumpkin pie," I tell her as she compiles her shopping list.

She puts down her pen and looks at me, completely aghast. "Well stuff you," she finally says. "I hate the way you eat your Corn Flakes dry without adding any milk."

At the christening my nephew snivels and cries, an appropriate response I think to all that ruckus. The priest drips water on his head, small droplets rolling into his eyes, which I dab with a tiny embroidered handkerchief, the same one my uncle dabbed at me.

Earlier that morning my sister came to find me as I was minding the baby while she got ready for church. "There's something I have to tell you," she said. "I know in the scheme of things it probably doesn't matter, but you were right when you accused me of taking Dad's Wildcats t-shirt to spite you. I did. You were always so relaxed about everything. I was trying to make you angry."

I don't know what I'd expected her to say, but in that moment I was so relieved it wasn't something more alarming I would have forgiven her just about anything. "If it makes you feel any better, I never lost your *Snow Queen* book," I confessed. "I kept it because Dad had inscribed it: *To my daughter*. I liked pretending he'd written it to me."

For a second there I thought she might attempt to seize the moral high ground, but she didn't.

"I'm really sorry," she said.

And I was too.

So this is how it is now, our family. All chips off the old block, but slightly new. Even the baby, who I'll concede actually looks a lot like Dad, or the way I remember Dad to be. He has the same chin and eyes and when he smiles I can see Dad smiling at me, the whole history of our clan distilled down to this one tiny moment, transition after transition, phase after phase, me and my nephew tucked up under a rug on the couch, my finger in his mouth, gently rocking.

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