

Her Mother's House

It is the morning of the show, and hot. She can tell this already, lying in her mother's bedroom, though the room itself is still quite cool, and a slight breeze coming through the open window makes the curtains billow. The light coming in from underneath them is stark, bright. The unyielding light of a clear sky. Yes, it is hot; she can feel the grit and sweat already, melting face-paint and the children's sticky hands. They will be excited – they have never been before. She herself has not been since she returned here. She did not intend to go, except that this time she has been roped in to the women's society, and is rostered on to serve sausages and pieces of cake through the window of the footy clubrooms. It will be hot in there too, with the pie heater, and the water for the savs. Why anyone would want them is a mystery, she thinks; and drags herself off the bed.

The children are up, when she reaches the kitchen. She can hear them squabbling. She wishes she was one of those mothers who seem to be able to waltz into an argument and smooth it out, straighten it, remove all fault from both sides, a floating force of harmony and love. Instead she droops to a stop, listening with her head leant against the door frame, and wishes she could go back to bed. James is louder than Ellie. She will take Ellie's side. She always does. She tightens the sash on her dressing-gown, and forces herself though the door. There is milk on the floor, dripping from the sides of the Aga, and down her mother's oven mits, hanging on the rail; and Ellie is crying. She almost has to laugh. Without saying anything, she finds the dishcloth and kneels to mop it up. James grins sheepishly, quiet suddenly, and returns to his cereal.

By the time she has them dressed and ready to go, the north wind has blown up, and the dust swirls in eddies around the car. She hustles them in, swinging Ellie dangerously from her hip, her pink floppy hat jammed over her curls, a plastic doll dangling by its wrist. She wonders vaguely where it came from, before recognizing it as one of her own childhood toys. She sighs. The kids must have been up in the old storerooms again. She has not cleaned them out, though she meant to when she came here; somehow, after her mother's funeral, it was simply easier to leave it all there. Living here was only meant to be

temporary, after all; and then Nick left. It sickens her, really, to think that her mother's house is all she has. She is haunted by dreams of her mother. Half her life gone and she hasn't even managed to leave home.

She pauses at the gate and realizes she has forgotten the hedgehog. Ladies, bring a slice, the letter said. She leaves the car running and trudges back in to get it. She could go without it, but already she can imagine their disdain; the vague Women's Society 'them', the district women, all leaning over her as her mother used to, wagging a finger, aprons over turtlenecks with the compulsory string of pearls. It is waiting in the fridge. It looks rather pathetic, really; not at all like she remembers her mother's looking. There is a piece missing from the tray, and she hasn't wrapped it. She drops it into an ice cream container, and heads back out. It is not far to the show ground. They travel most of the way in silence, though the car splutters and groans. James pokes at Ellie incessantly, and she swings round in her seat to snap at him. He sits back, sullen. She sighs again. She can feel a headache staring in her temples, and it's only ten o'clock. She wonders vaguely if everyone else's children are so unpleasant.

She takes the children around the show, first. Nothing has changed, though the camels must be different, she supposes. She has to stop James from poking one of the bulls with a stick, and Ellie from stealing the cupcakes from the trestles in the hall. The kids both get their faces painted, and the vague-looking woman insists on dabbing a butterfly onto her cheek as well. She buys them show-bags, and chips in a greasy bucket. They wander through the chickens and the ducks sweltering in the corrugated iron sheds. The stale smell of the beer tent hangs cloying over the empty stage, a team of men bustle through the drifting crowds, setting up the speakers for the Showgirl competition, and a mother fusses around the sash on a girl's white dress. She is sweating under her makeup, poor thing. Ellie hangs off the rail around the oval, transfixed by the showjumpers, while James throws smoke pellets into the road. She drifts through it all, daunted by the colour and noise, overwhelmed by heat and memory. Nothing has changed at all, and it begins to make her dizzy. Eventually she heads for the footy club, James dragging behind her, kicking at the dust. She pauses outside to wipe the dirt from Ellie's nose, and leaves them on the playground. A bunch of other youngsters rocket around, laughing and screaming. Ellie's little friend

from play-group is there, and kids from James' class. She sighs, gives them strict instructions not to leave the area, and leaves them to wrestle over the last of Ellie's sweets. She pauses at the back door. Already they are yelling and screaming with the rest. She hesitates, and goes inside.

It is cool inside. She had not expected this, and she closes her eyes as it washes over her. They are busy in the kitchen, though, and she waits stupidly at the door to be told what to do. She has left the slice in the car.

'Here to help, love?' Despite the endearment, the woman's eye is hard.

'Yes.'

'Well, then, get an apron...' she says, patronizingly. 'You can make some more fruit salads for us.'

A younger, blonde woman in the corner smiles and rolls her eyes. The apron is sticky when she puts it on, and the whipped cream has solidified in its bowl. She finds a fork, and attacks it, moving to the bench beside the blonde.

'New to the area?'

She looks up, surprised. 'Yes, after a fashion.'

The blonde raises her eyebrows. She has artificial nails. 'After a fashion?'

'I grew up here. I'm in my mother's old house.'

'Ah. Celia, by the way. Everyone calls me Cee.'

'Laura.'

'It's nice to meet you,' she says, and smiles, offering her a scarlet-tipped hand.

She smiles back, and shakes it, and starts to ladle tinned fruit into the line of waiting cups.

When they let her go, the children are waiting on the back step. She has to drag them to the car. Their arms are burnt, she should have remembered to put more sunscreen on them. She moves to open the front door before she realizes she has left her bag behind. She sighs, and looks at the kids. She can't leave them here. She scoops Ellie up, turns around and starts trudging back.

The beer tent is in full swing as they pass. A couple of men wander about the oval winding in ropes, and a band is tuning up on the showgirl stage. Someone is on the mic advertising the meat-tray raffle, and a few blokes are hanging around a BBQ under the veranda of the club rooms. She walks towards the front entrance, weaving in between a group of older ladies who hover around a table and a plate of cut sandwiches, and dumps the kids in a corner by the door.

'Stay here, Ok? Don't move. I'll only be a sec.' James tilts his head, and pretends to be a statue.

She is furtive, in the kitchen, as she grabs her bag from under the bench. She hates how it makes her feel, creeping back in idiotically. It is empty, everyone else is outside, or has gone home. She swings the bag over her shoulder, and turns off the light.

When she gets outside, the children have disappeared. The old ladies just shake their heads and murmur when she asks them. They remind her of surprised owls. She walks back around to the playground, and knows she should be panicking when she finds it empty, but somehow she is too hot, too tired. The beer tent, she thinks, and wanders back towards the noise of the stage. Celia is in the beer tent, sitting on a table with her legs crossed, her scarlet nails fluttering as she illustrates a point. Everyone is talking, voices raised to be heard. She can't see the children, and turns to leave. A table of drunk men whistle at her.

'Painted lady!' One crows, and they all laugh. She raises her hand to her cheek, feeling stupid. The butterfly is still there, greasy, and she longs instantly for a shower.

'Two kids?' she asks.

'Sorry, love,' says the one closest to her, frowning and shaking his head. His voice and the smell of beer reminds her of her father. She stomach tightens, and she leaves.

She is halfway back to the car before she finds them. They are sitting in the long grass by the cricket nets, against a tyre. Ellie is half asleep, her head resting on James' shoulder, and the sight of them makes her throw her head back, panting. As she moves towards them she has an overwhelming urge to scoop them up into her arms. They, at least, are all her. Everything else here – the ladies, the sandwiches and slice, the oval and the stage, even the greasy face paint on her cheek – is her mother. At least, she thinks, she has them. She swings Ellie onto a hip, and pulls James up by an arm. He looks at her curiously, but she just smiles.

'Home time?' She asks, and Ellie nods.