

*Mrs Taylor Gets a Tattoo*

Among the backyard debris of deflated balls, rusting bicycles and abandoned sweaters, Mrs Taylor was hanging out her washing and hyperventilating. She had been pegging something that perhaps was once a white lacy bra and muttering about new underwear, when she began to imagine that she had performed exactly the same action, uttered the same internal grumble, even yawned at the same second as she had the day before and she couldn't breathe. There she was, sucked under the current of domesticity, like being pinned in the tumbling momentum of the surf, not knowing when the inevitable revolutions would throw her up for a snatch of air, a view of the sky.

Gulping for breath in the raw spring sunlight, she tried to detach herself from the familiarity of the clothes stiff on the line: a boy's blue overalls, ripped on one knee; a girl's T-shirt with a heart-shaped chocolate stain on the chest; a man's jeans so worn they still held his shape. But she knew each item intimately, could tell its history, was part of its life. It seemed her very existence was inextricably woven into the fabric of the mundane.

Robbie had shattered a tooth the day he ripped those overalls. He stood in front of her, wide-eyed and still, like the rabbits she had trapped as a child on the farm in Somerset. The screams only came with the blood, his mouth pumping a caustic red on the dull concrete. Swallowing back a wave of nausea she had gathered him in her arms and driven to Emergency, his body still wrapped around hers, her heart beating double time to the click of the indicators on the dashboard. After surgery to remove the tooth, a young

Indian doctor had touched her arm. "Don't worry, Mrs Taylor. He's not the first five-year-old to knock out a front tooth. He'll live." He had tried to smile indulgently, like someone older, more experienced, but beneath the neat folds of turban, she saw his black eyes reflecting her breasts. Looking down at herself after he had swung out of sight along the squeaking corridor, she saw her shirt gaping open, her neck and bra smeared with dried blood. She thought about his look for days, weeks afterwards, guiltily when stroking Robbie to sleep, turning it over luxuriously in the bath late at night, allowing it to creep up on her as she tried to scrub the blood from her shirt in the laundry. Her life seemed defined by a handful of unrelated moments. They were her view of the sky, the outline of herself on the sand as she fought to tread water in the monotonous swell of her life.

Some days in the supermarket, gasping in the plastic fragrance of the laundry and cleaning aisles, she toyed with trivial whims, gestures of quiet rebellion. She would shave her head or get a nipple pierced. She would go to the city, buy some hash, then make biscuits with it for her Mothers' Group. She would approach the next man who smiled at her and offer him unconditional sex in the back of his car. Instead she'd go home and turn over her potato beds, her heart easing as she felt the sweat collect in the small of her back and smelled the sweet rotting dampness of the earth. Then it would be time for the school run and she'd be treading water again.

Jack was away most of the time: two months at a time on a rig in the South China Sea. She'd had a good corporate job in Singapore when they met and was living an expatriate

life of excess: working too hard, drinking too much, too busy for relationships, too lonely to feel fulfilled. Women like her didn't look at *rig pigs* with their easy cash and entourage of willowy Asian girls, all laughing too loudly. That was the thrill of it. She didn't have anything to say as she led him outside and into a taxi. And no words were needed by the time he pushed up her skirt and nudged her legs apart with his knees on the stairs of her apartment.

Afterwards she told him that he was to leave, that it had been fun and better left uncomplicated by identities, histories or futures. He stayed for two weeks, laying siege to her flat, changing its smell and space, spreading himself through her ordered life until it was no longer her own. Six years later she had two children, a dog and a partially renovated house in suburban Sydney. Sometimes she struggled to remember how she got there. Like she had woken one morning and found herself living someone else's life by mistake. Perhaps if she went back to Singapore she would still find herself propped on the veranda steps, shining with sweat, smoking a Marlboro and listening to the mosquitoes under the Traveller's Palm.

By the time Robbie and Cat were at school, Jack's home leave had become shorter and reeked of duty. In bed his wiry body was a foreign country and the smell of other women seeped through his pores, like someone else's cooking in her kitchen. She didn't have the courage or the energy to confront her intuition. Instead she hung it out to dry with the sheets, to be blanched by the sun, or tucked it away under collars of the children's uniforms as she ironed.

And then came Sam.

At first there was only the dull thud of music next door, movements of garbage bins and car doors shutting in the early hours of the morning. Then, one afternoon, digging between the agapanthus at the bottom of the garden, she became conscious of her own movements and looking up saw a square, tanned face perched on the lip of the fence, the budding beginnings of blonde dreadlocks scooped into a black band, a cleft in the chin accentuated as it rested on the rough wood. "Are you digging your way back to England? The Great Escape?"

She wiped her nose on the back of her sleeve and studied the dirty streaks. "How did you know I was English?"

"Your shoulders. Only Pommies carry that much tension."

She looked down and skewered a clump of soil with her fork.

"I was kidding. It must be tough doing it all on your own – the single mum thing."

"I'm not on my own." She didn't know whether to feel disturbed or flattered that someone had even noticed.

"Not around much, though, is he?"

She began to dig again and there was a pause as the dreadlocks were untied and re-scooped into the band.

"Shall we start again? Hello. I'm Sam – house-sitter for David next door, itinerant bartender, struggling artist, tactless, curious, annoying. I think that about sums it up."

A hand was proffered over the fence. She pulled off a glove and shook it quickly, at the same time toying with excuses of doctor's appointments or school canteen duty. Instead she said:

"I'm Helen ... Um, housewife, mother. I think that about sums it up."

"Oh, does it?" A thick blonde eyebrow rose briefly and Helen noticed the tanned evenness of the face, still unlined, and steady blue eyes that were more confident than her own, although easily ten years younger.

"So, white and one for me," Sam threw over the fence. She saw the dreadlocks drifting along it to the front of the house.

"Ah ... coffee or tea?" Helen heard the panic in her own voice. She didn't like to admit to herself that her social life was nothing more than a busy succession of dull meetings with other mothers in playgrounds: predictable, claustrophobic, but strangely comforting in their mix of cappuccinos, cake and unchallenging conversation. Now there would be a stranger in her kitchen, someone not of her kind. She would have to think, appear charming, be judged. As she ran back into the house and kicked off her boots, she realised she would have to resurrect her childless identity and she was almost paralysed by the sudden fear that it might no longer exist.

"So what did you do before all this? Before the suburban thing?" Sam was lounging on one of her barstools at the kitchen counter, in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt stained with paint, one buttock propped on the rattan of the seat, one long leg stretched out into the centre of the kitchen. Helen had to keep stepping over a bare foot to make the coffee. Sam seemed to find her inconvenience amusing.

"I was in banking in Asia."

"And before that?"

"In banking in London."

"And before that?"

"I didn't realise this was going to an interrogation." She tried to laugh.

"I know. You were at Uni and ... no, please don't say you did Finance." Sam made an elaborate shudder.

"No, it was Medieval Literature actually. A Masters for what it's worth."

"There! I knew it. I knew there was something. Some passion."

"What, poring over dusty manuscripts in the Bodleian to write a thesis that no one will ever read about books that no one ever reads? It was a bit sad really. I was young and didn't know much else, apart from academia."

"So how did you get from the Bodleian to Banking? How could the Middle Ages become money markets and flannel suits and the FT Index?"

"I don't know, I guess life gets in the way. Passion gives way to the practicalities of living, doesn't it?" She thought of Jack entwined with a Malay girl while she groaned at the naked moonlit reflection of herself caught in the bathroom mirror as she led Cat to the toilet in the middle of the night.

"Is painting your passion, then?" She spoke into the door of the fridge and attempted to tack away from herself.

"Mm ... among other things." Sam grinned. When Helen swung around from the fridge she found herself confronted with a naked torso, square at the shoulders, tapering smoothly to the waist, and covered almost entirely with tattoos in minute detail: a

woman's eye, a rearing horse, lovers with arms and legs entwined, the frond of a fern about to spring open, a wave breaking. It could easily have been garish and raw, but the artwork was exceptional and the shape of the back itself made her want to glide her hands over it, to feel it under her breasts. She felt like sobbing at the shock of sudden feeling.

"I drew most of them." Sam was dressing again. "I've sold a few designs but it doesn't pay the rent. So I do a few illustrations, bartending, housesit, you know. Life is good and I don't get bored that way." And then almost without drawing breath, "Let me draw you." Helen groped for some sense of control and tried to condescend with the superiority of age.

"Oh right, study of an ageing housewife? Sounds very dull. What do you want to be drawing me for?"

"Well, maybe I *like* the curve of the vertebrae under your T-shirt when you dig your garden and the shape the sweat makes seeping between your shoulders. Are they good enough reasons?"

Helen turned away toward the kettle and tried to let go of the knot at the base of her neck.

Sam stood at an easel behind a large plywood board marked on the reverse side with erratic strokes in charcoal and the remnants of masking tape from previous sketches.

Helen wondered who the subjects were and felt oddly annoyed at the idea of other women in front of the easel. Afterwards, the annoyance itself annoyed her.

"Right, clothes off, then." Sam called from behind the board. She went slowly over to a chair and began to fumble with fastenings, confronting the same awkward vulnerability she always felt at doctors' physicals. Being nude in broad daylight in front of a clothed

person made her feel large and disjointed, cartoon-like. She was still turning the feeling over when she felt a hand on her hip and another on her neck, thumbs pressing into her skin confidently like a sculptor's on clay.

"I want you to have your back to me and lean slightly..." Then she stopped listening and followed only the pressure of Sam's hands. It had been a long time. The hairs on her arms were raised and the skin around her nipples had filled out.

"Are you cold?" Sam's voice floated back into the room.

"No," she answered and, as she held the pose, she felt Sam's hands smooth down the length of her back, like a cloth.

There were no words exchanged as Sam drew. The spin, the humour, the curiosity were gone. The room became heavy with breath, with the hollow scratch of charcoal on paper, the tearing of new sheets and masking tape. Helen became aware of every sound, of her own shape, each hair, her pulse, the rise of her ribs for air. Eventually she felt exhausted by it, like labouring with a child. Finally she heard tape being pulled off the board and watched as a sheet, tossed into the air, spiralled to the floorboards. "I'm done. They're alright for a first go, but I didn't quite crack you." Sam came up behind her as she was dressing and kissed the skin between her shoulders. "Thanks for being so still and patient."

Helen almost ran home, not stopping to look at the sketches, trailing some excuse about babysitters and the time. The kiss still prickled between her shoulders and had made her wet. She slid beneath the surface of the bath water and held the breath in her cheeks. She



was being played for fun, a small project to while away the time. Sam was that kind of person. But did it really matter? For the first time in the suffocating swell of the past six years she was coming up for air. Dripping onto the carpet as she held the receiver, she stalled briefly as she heard Sam's voice answer, gentle from sleep. Then she filled her lungs and said slowly, "It's me, it's Helen."

There were many more tattoos she discovered, examining each new find, watching it move over muscle, admiring its starkness outlined against the white of her sheets or wrapped around the comparative paleness of her own skin. Strangely, someone so distinct from Jack, so removed, made her think of him more. It wasn't guilt or vengeance, but purely practical consideration: she had suddenly begun to think about how she felt to him when he made love to her, what the fleshy curve of her breasts or the arch of her back meant, the taste, the sound of herself.

One morning Sam was gone. There were twelve nudes of Helen in charcoal rolled up on her doorstep and another small sketch that she had never seen before with a note. "Keep waving not drowning. Love, Sam."

Jack arrived home three weeks later. She found suddenly that that she had an urgent desire to spread her smell over him, reclaim him. Afterwards, in their bed, she lay on her stomach and waited. His fingers at the base of her neck traced the lines of the mermaid's fin, her bare torso, the arms raised above her head. She felt the breath of his gentle laugh.

“David’s house-sitter designed it for me. I had it done a few weeks ago. Spur of the moment. Remember the Helen who did things like that?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do. It’s actually quite beautiful, isn’t it? He was a good artist then, this house-sitter of David’s?”

“She was. She was a very good artist,” Helen said. And when she closed her eyes she saw the outline of herself on the sand.