

Laughing like Children

The kids are already stir-crazy. But we won't go out. I don't know where we are, and we might get lost. What a grim joke, given we're already lost. So lost.

"Tomorrow, we'll get your name down for transitional housing. Expect a wait, though." The social worker had prattled on as he drove, hunched forward, drizzle smearing his windscreen with streaks of dirt and dead insects. He'd fiddled with the windscreen wiper button, but it made no difference. Blades sweeping down fast, or slow, or not at all, we still had to grope our way through last night to this refuge.

I wanted to say, "Don't bother," about the emergency housing. I wanted to say, "Enough. Don't expect me to bounce back again. Patched up. Pushed on. . . There are too many punctures. Too many patches. Patches on patches. Isn't it obvious? I can't keep the kids safe. I'm not sure I can do this anymore."

Those same kids are at it again. Squabbling. Harry bossing; Annie protesting... *it's my turn with the hose... I hate you... you're a selfish, horrible boy... you've got no friends, you nasty, selfish girl... no-one likes you ... you're breaking it... you're breaking it... let go, you bastard or I'll hit you.* The novelty of the new backyard, with its box of toys and drunken swing-set, has lasted all of ten minutes, before they've broken to this parroting of their parents.

What other way do they know, these fledglings who've fled, yet again, with their broken-winged mother? The traffic lights of last night's flight course had illuminated the eyes of my nine-year-old Harry – baby eyes betraying the maturity of his pat on my arm, and his reassuring, "I'll look after you, Mum." Beneath my other wing, little Annie had huddled, legs tucked up beneath her chin, eyes shut. Shrinking into the smallest target.

When we veered from the highway to wind our way around curves, the night's blackness hid their faces, and I felt Annie's tiny body slacken, and curl in closer. On the rutted track into this place, she fell asleep.

Where the track narrowed, and ghost gums stooped to scrape and scratch at the car, Harry cringed and cried out "Giants with great big arms," and he clung to me and would not be consoled.

From atop a high fence, a security camera stalked every move from car to gate. Bars on windows, caught in the torch's flash, glinted malevolently.

First, locks had to be negotiated. A heavy padlock on the gate; a security door squealing an agonised resistance; a reinforced front door groaning beneath its duties. Numbers were jabbed into an alarm in the hallway.

The waft of industrial strength disinfectant announced a place more hospital than home.

The social worker held his finger to his lips as we tip-toed in, Annie a dead-weight in my arms, Harry's clutching my blood-spattered t-shirt. The worker had warned, "Where I'm taking you, there's a young woman already staying. Don't know if she'll be in yet. The mix in these refuges isn't ideal, but they're better than staying where you were. Better than the street."

We slipped into a made-up bed, the children still in their footy jumpers. Embroidered with magnificent eagles, those jumpers were lifejackets protecting them against the ravages of the storm buffeting us, and they clung to them. I couldn't help reflecting how, when the kids were welcomed at the junior footy club in the place we've just been forced out of, I'd dared to believe we'd found a haven.

But still I'd fretted about fees and footy gear. I knew we'd found a home when the club manager poked two jumpers into Annie's bag. No fuss. No thanks needed.

Last night, snug in those jumpers, they'd slept as only children can, even when the ground beneath their feet has crumbled and washed away.

But I had lain awake, watching the minutes click over in fluorescent light on the clock radio beside the bed.

I drifted.

I reached for a mirage – a youthful version of myself lying awake in a narrow bed top to tail with my sister, heart quickening with the heat of ambition. Would I succeed? Would I contribute – massively – to this country which welcomed my parents as refugees from a war-torn country? My duty: to show gratitude. My fear: to disappoint.

The mirage vanished into mist. As 3.00 a.m. gleamed on the clock radio, I was wide awake again and the yearning was only for normality. How powerfully the lure of bland suburbia beckons for those denied it.

On a windy Sunday morning, not long ago, I'd huddled on the boundary of a footy oval with the other mothers, cheering our kids. The talk turned, as it does, to life – and to partners. To some whingeing about those partners. One woman's lament struck deep. *He's a good man, I know that. Helps with the kids. Works hard. Kind. If he could just see he's married a social butterfly. I MUST party.*

Choking down lumps of anger, I'd quipped, "Oh Darling, care to swap places?"

What point to wallow in envy and bitterness? Poor salves for guilt.

For how many times did I ignore the foreshocks? The phone calls, the heavy breathing down the line, the silences when I demanded he stop ringing. Fissures, tearing at the crust of the world I had built for the children.

Waiting, holding my breath, I'd willed the phone calls to be enough for him. And I'd reasoned that if he didn't know where we were, we were safe.

Snakes and rats and weasels would have fled to safety with that rattling of the earth's crust. Carcasses of wild animals are seldom found in the wake of tidal waves.

But there was a grand final to be played. A school concert where the children would be pirates and sailors for an evening.

The silent phone calls morphed into a tidal wave of abuse.

And still I stayed.

Fortified my world with double-barrelled locks and alarms on lanyards. Sand-bagging a tsunami.

I stayed until the bulge in the crust left in the wake of the tidal wave bloomed into a massive rupture, and the earthquake triggered became the monster that would uproot us and send us fleeing in this tailspin.

Had I fallen asleep when I heard glass shattering, and felt fists thump my aching jaw? I must have. My mind insists we're safe; my jaded senses cannot accept it.

Of some things though, I am certain. Someone, in the dread of night, banged a door with such force that it rattled our window, and I drew the children to me and coiled my legs, ready to spring.

How long did I lie thus? I'll never know. I dared not wriggle round to check the clock— and risk the children's groans proclaiming our whereabouts.

Locked doors, charged by an enraged bull, can rip like cardboard.

Just as my heart ceased its drumming, a new sound rent the night. A wailing, as of a snared animal, waiting for the end. And it was all I could do not to join in, and howl in a symphony of woe. If the walls in this house of sorrows could speak, what a litany of griefs they would recount. Or perhaps, overwhelmed by the number of victims they have sheltered, they would incant only the one universal grief that has delivered them so many women and children, hunted far from everything familiar and reassuring.

Did the keening stop first? Or did I fall asleep before it ceased? What I know is that I woke exhausted to find the house had stilled, but my eyelids had sealed in the tears I'd been shedding.

Then came the demons I must wrestle – the bleakness, the blind alleys of any future course. In a bizarre confraternity of odd-fellows, they brought the ghosts of might-have-beens, too slippery to engage in battle, but seizing the opportunity to swoop, and smother any stubborn remnants of self-confidence.

Harry and Annie hardly stirred until a kookaburra shocked them into wakefulness with his mocking laughter.

Now, energised by uninterrupted sleep, the children are pulling at the sleeves of my frayed hoodie. "It's boring here."

"There's nothing but birds and trees."

"And sheep," Annie chimes in.

“Sheep are boring. Just baa-baaa-baaaa,” Harry yells, his face too close to hers.

Whining, nagging, fracturing my thoughts. Demanding I piece together their shattered world. They are still in their Eagles jumpers for I have nothing for them to change into. The only thing they're happy about.

They're tiptoeing around the *you've got no friends* accusations they hurled at each other minutes ago. A spot so sore they may not push on it again.

But on every other front, it's a no-holds barred attack. *Mum, tell her to give me a turn with the hose ... You're ugly, ugly ... at least I'm not a stupid bitch.*

How deeply they have drunk of the worst of their father and me.

I know it now. It had assaulted me with such force in the reflections of the night that it almost propelled me, fearful of weakening, from bed. What I know is that I have to let them go, these children of mine. When my worker comes, I'll ask him to find sanctuary for these little ones whose mother is too wounded to protect them. A nesting place where they can heal. A solid base from which they can learn to fly.

Harry slumps into a vinyl chair beside me. I say nothing. He begins again, “She's had the hose all —”

Thump. The vegemite jar on the table leaps centimetres, the dirty milo glasses tremble. Above us quivers a halo of peroxidized hair, a dry-stick nest framing a face onto which, like the canvas of a madman, bruises are bleeding in random splodges. “Control your brats. Call yourself a mother? Working all night, I need a bit of damned peace to get some sleep,” a lip-stick-smearred mouth shrieks.

The eyes are huge and blacked. Round the left is a smudge of mascara and eyeliner; eyeliner smeared into yellow bruising makes the right look larger still. She's skinny in a way that screams a lifetime of under-nourishment, and her top lip is curled. I thrust an arm in front of each child. *If she hits out, let it just be me.* The old, familiar prayer from the eternal human shield.

"Well?" she demands, one hand on her hip, the other holding a smoke from which she drags and exhales puffs of contempt.

Annie ducks from beneath my arm, and stumbles away. Harry wriggles from my grasp to follow. They run to the far end of the yard and disappear into the netting around the trampoline.

"Well? What you gonna do about the racket?" she demands.

"You won't have to put up with them much longer." I can hear my own voice as if it is the voice of someone else. Hard, cold, matter of fact. Clinical analysis, prognosis, plan of action. "When my worker comes, I'll get him to find places for them. Some kind of care. I'm giving them up – for the best."

Miss Peroxide stops mid-drag and stares, then coughs and splutters on the trapped smoke. Her throat cleared, she finds a croaky voice, more whisper than shriek. "You can't mean that? You're not serious?"

Muted by the enormity of what I must do, I nod.

"Oh, Love," she gasps, perching beside me. "Oh, Love, no. They're ya kids. You can't."

“They’ll be better off. Safe and stable.” On a swallow of something bitter leeching into my mouth, I add, “And you’ll get your sleep.”

“No, no.” Her eyes dart with the terror of a trapped bird’s.

‘They’ve picked up the fighting from their father. He’s a pit bull– can’t let us go. Found us again last night. The kids have seen too much. Seen nothing better. Had no chance to be kids. You mustn’t blame them.’

“No, no.” As if she hasn’t heard my terrible confession, she’s stuck on our first interchange. Leaning in, she confides, “I was in and out of care.” Her eyes mist and her fist pounds a painful rhythm on the table. “Not always bad, that care. But some of it? Well, look at the hell the worst of it has brought me to.”

The children have drifted back. Wide-eyed, drop-jawed, they’re propped on the steps, listening. All the squabbling quelled.

Tears, banked up behind my terrible decision, prick and sting behind my eyelids. The rough kindness of this girl who works at night punctures the walls of my determination. The banks break, and I put my head on the table and weep.

“Have a good cry,” the girl says. “It can’t flush out all the sadness. But it can wash away the top layer. Gives your guts a chance to push through and take over. I cried when I got back here this morning. Prob’ly woke you up with my howling. Rough night, it was. But when your kids woke me... well, I was itching for a fight, wasn’t I?”

I lift my head to look at her, and she smiles. “See? Your mojo’s already returning. I’ll give you a break with the kids while you fix us something to eat. There’s spaghetti on the bench. Tomatoes in the blue container in the fridge.”

Tears dribble into the saucepan, into the frying pan. My God, would you look at me, the careful mother? How has it come to this? My precious children being cared for by this woman who works at night?

Somehow, through my tears, I bumble about the kitchen and rummage through cupboards to locate what we need. Somehow, the bench comes alive with four bowls of piping hot spaghetti, sauced and cheesed.

Out on the veranda, Miss Peroxide is blowing smoke rings and calling as the children dart about with a footy. “Just look at Annie, the brilliant Eagles mid-fielder. She might be small, but what skill as she scoops the leather and handballs it to Harry. Handball it, Annie, And she does. But have you ever seen anything like this young Harry? The recruit. Watch him soar. Up, and up. Watch him as he shoots for goal. Straight through the big sticks of the clothesline. A goal. A goal to put the Eagles in front. Who would have thought it? They’ve come from behind, this team, in what must rank amongst the greatest come-backs in the history of our glorious game.”

“Half-time,” I say, pointing towards the bowls I’ve set down on the outdoor table, away from the house and wiped clean of dead flies and dust. “Lunch is served. Calling all players. Calling our multi-tasking commentator and coach.”

The sun is out and the food smells hot and wholesome as the footballers wash their hands under the tap on the tank-stand.

When the coach flops onto a garden chair. I inhale. Hold. Wait for a jibe at my cooking to match her parenting dig.

She leans over the bowl and breathes in. Her face breaks to a broken-toothed grin. “This’ll put a shine on our shit,” she says, winking at the kids.

Smiles twitching around sad mouths, they dart glances at me.

When I laugh, they stare, open-mouthed. Then they throw back their heads and smack the table, swept up in a tide of joyous abandonment. For a moment I think of the kookaburras that woke them that morning.

But no, they are not laughing like kookaburras, compelled by some physiology to make their glorious sound. Harry and Annie are laughing like children.