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# Matthew Karpin

## *An extract from the novel The Thesis: 'The Dysfunctional (Family) as Signifier'*

### Abstract:

The following is an extract from a novel called The Thesis, a tragicomedy about a young woman, Barbara Marchant, who is struggling to write her thesis. The title of her thesis is 'The Dysfunctional (Family) as Signifier'. She describes herself as 'an infinite regress merchant' who tends to hold 'a mirror up to a mirror'. The text begins just at the point where Barbara is dealing with the difficult fourth chapter of her thesis, but is constantly interrupted by some of the people she interviewed in researching her work, identified only by the initial of their last names.

*Barbara seemingly has no compunction about speaking on behalf of others but readily assumes authority over the stories of the people, O, K and M. At one point she says of K, 'our interview [was] finished and now, as far as I was concerned, he existed only as words on a page, to be interpreted.' It is the death of the author; but paradoxically, the location of the author remains both fixed and dislocated, in that she is obviously, in the context of the story, the author, however she has herself been authored.*

*While one of the interviewees, O, claims the interview she has just conducted with Barbara was 'nothing but a series of lies, the contents of her entire interview were fiction; she had long lived, you see, a very rich fantasy-life', Barbara disputes this notion of the division between truth and fiction - the character's authority to re-describe her own life - and is happy to take the words as spoken during the interview as if now set in concrete. And yet, while Barbara denies the interviewee the authority to re-describe her own life, she treats the words on the page that result from the transcription of the tape as having an authority all of their own, apart from the life of the person who uttered them: "Oh!" I continued, "I don't care if what you said is not 'true'! I don't believe in the truth anymore. What you said to me was said, and will remain said to the very end, no matter what attitude you have to it now."*

It is the classic - and yet postmodern - position of the alleged author denying the authority of those characters, now textualised, from having authority other than that granted them by the author within the text, and at the same time, able to claim such authority only because it is possible that they exist outside the text. At the same time, in a work of fiction, all such questions themselves are bound within a further set of quotation marks. Sometimes the story that is represented as true is simply the story that was, for whatever reason, the one that was textualised.

We can never locate the author as such because there is no unified subject and no location of a unified history. We are always presented with our own discontinuity but we still act as if we are authors. We still need to tell our lives, and of course want others to tell them.

The work to which I had committed myself, an extraordinary thesis called 'The Dysfunctional (Family) as Signifier', was my one reward, and so I took up the fourth chapter again with renewed determination, sitting at my desk going over old material, becoming aware again of just how wonderful what I'd done actually was, and pitying the other people, everyone out there as I imagined them to be, who relied on the opinion of others for confirmation of their worth, while I counted my whole world as consisting of what went on between me and pages of words. I worked in this way completely happily for several hours, attempting to establish a new category for the overwhelming interview I had conducted with O when, out of the blue, the telephone rang which I decided to answer, even though it was likely to interfere significantly with my train of thought. Of all people, it turned out to be O herself on the line, sounding very different from when I had last spoken to her, and telling me that, after twenty years of not talking to him, she had recently seen her brother again, in fact my questions had led her to get back in touch with him, for which she thanked me, she and he had patched up their many differences and she now deeply regretted that she had spoken so frankly to me about him. In the light of her new friendship with her brother, it had been a mistake. She

would never forgive herself if anything she had told me on tape regarding their highly complex relationship were ever to be repeated, let alone one day published, it would probably destroy her entire family, and she was asking me, as gently as she could, if I would hand over to her the tapes I'd made, plus any transcriptions I may have completed from them, for which she would of course compensate me to "the full value." I gasped in disbelief and told her she could never compensate me for the loss of such material, and although I sympathised with her new feelings I simply would not hand over the tapes or transcriptions which I foolishly admitted I'd already made. Poor O's voice trembled as she said, "I'm asking you as a friend, you obviously don't understand, I haven't been able to sleep since completing our series of interviews, there were things I should never have told anyone!" I assured her of her anonymity and reminded her that, as she herself had told me, she had never been able to sleep, and if it was not one thing causing her insomnia it would be another, at which point she rudely hung up the telephone leaving me a fuming mess, thrown for a while completely off my work. I couldn't believe such presumption, how could she seriously ask me to discard a portion of my work simply because of her neurotic fears? An elderly woman like O should surely have known the ways of the world better, that once you release your story to someone else, as she had, it was no longer yours, it became public property, never to be called back. On and off I allowed myself to indulge my discomfort with this latest conduct by O, but at the same time returned to an analysis of her interview, trying for the next several weeks to devise a particular category for someone like her who admittedly defied categorisation, when one day a rather disheartening letter arrived in the post. It had apparently been generated by O's solicitors, and asked in no uncertain terms what she had asked on the telephone, that I return to O "materials taped in her presence, between such and such dates and any transcriptions that may have been derived from such tapes, or else risk a court order to the same effect." The letter then went on to dispute copyright ownership of such materials, claiming ownership in such cases must be "dual" and permission to publish could legally be withdrawn by either party. A peculiar definition of publication followed, which suggested I was committing the act of "publication" on any occasion I played the tapes or transcribed their contents in part or in full. The letter ended by saying, "We trust you will contact this office as soon as possible so that an amicable settlement may be reached, signed so and so." I stopped work in order to read and re-read this ridiculous letter, and wondered if the best thing to do with it would be to simply throw it in the rubbish bin, but doubted the problem would go away so easily. I decided there was no way my thesis could survive the loss of O's interview, but there was also no way I could survive fighting such a petty woman in court, or even fighting her solicitors through the mail. Finally I telephoned O and complained to her about the letter I'd received, but once again she embarked on her tirade, explaining I really didn't understand, it was as much for my sake as hers that I surrender the tapes because, she now had to confess, what she'd told me was nothing but a series of lies, the contents of her entire interview were fiction; she had long lived, you see, a very rich fantasy-life, and when she'd noticed my advertisement in the newspaper asking for stories of family breakdown it had set something in motion in her, but everything she had said to me during her interview, and everything she said into the machine on her own after I'd finished asking questions and left her to record remarks by herself, particularly about her father and two brothers, was untrue. "Mrs O!" I exclaimed, now myself very impassioned, "I long ago came to a decision about what you so conveniently call 'truth'! That I would no longer allow notions of the division between truth and fiction to stand in my way!" As I heard her utter "Oh!" I continued, "I don't care if what you said is not 'true'! I don't believe in the truth anymore. What you said to me was said, and will remain said to the very end, no matter what attitude you may have to it now." Mrs O replied, "But I have defamed my own brother!" and I responded, "You simply don't understand, Mrs O. Please allow me to explain this to you. What you said about your family has many layers, the one thing may be true at one level and at another not, but nothing is singularly true or false and I will not give you back your tapes!" Mrs O began to cry and told me she had no idea I was such a sophist, if she had known she would never have become involved with me in the first place, at which I couldn't help retorting, "Really Mrs O! It's you who've been telling all the lies!" and once again she hung up on me, but I was quite sure the matter was still unresolved. And I was right: later in the week, as I was wading through various theories I had of this impossible woman's behaviour, I received another dreaded telephone call, this time from someone who informed me he was a friend of Mrs O and that I'd better take her seriously, she was a determined old so and so, and if I wasn't careful I really would end up in court. I took a deep breath and replied, "What you evidently don't understand is that I simply don't care! I don't live in the same world as you, and anything that happens outside my four walls, in fact anything that happens off the page, is of no consequence to me," and hung up on him. But by now I was sick and tired of the intrusions on my time and interruptions to my concentration, which had slowed my work to a snail's pace, and since I couldn't afford to have to deal with other people's problems as well as my own I rang Mrs O again, this time with a view to ending once and for all any correspondence between us. As soon as I had her on the line I said, "Mrs O! I just had a telephone call from some bully claiming to be a friend of yours." She knew straightaway who I meant, muttering in response, "Oh! Mr so and so," and I continued, "I am fed up with this whole business. You have the wrong attitude Mrs O. Just think about this: you are an old woman, I can't imagine you'll live very much longer. The work I am doing from the interviews I conducted with you will one day soon be the only lasting record of your entire life. You actually should give me your blessing, because my thesis is giving some meaning to an otherwise totally uneventful life," but I wasn't able to continue beyond this point because once again the old woman was crying too hard, and only some hours after this last confrontation with Mrs O could I again turn to the real problem, that of how to textualise many ideas that still remained unrealised and yet to be given form. I began to work on one concept, that in spite of the difficulty of putting her into a category, O's type of dysfunctional family was actually the most common of any of those I was studying, she needed family disharmony in order to function disruptively; she was therefore dysfunctionally functionally dysfunctional, as was, perhaps, the majority of humanity, and the fantasies she'd reported during her interview and only confessed to after it was over were in fact the best proof of her triple remove

from reality. Thoughts of dear old Mrs O, so unwilling to accept her own strong recognitions, were in fact uppermost in my mind when, several weeks after my last conversation with her, at the same time I'd reached what I was able to think of as the midpoint of my crucial fourth chapter, I received what I hoped was the last in my series of correspondence to do with her, this time a letter apparently from her brother, who informed me of his sister's recent death during surgery, and also that he'd become aware that I had certain tapes of conversations with her which, although he knew they contained numerous slanders on - or other observations to do with - him and other members of his family, he sincerely hoped I would cherish, and that one day I'd somehow work them into a book, because he was sure the whole world would be able to enjoy his sister's vivid imagination. After reading the letter, I had a good mind to write back to this brother of O and rebuke him for his presumption, since he seemed to be implying that my thesis would be a fiction co-authored by O! However I restrained myself, I really didn't want more problems with the O family, the best thing was to put the sorry incident behind me, and as I reminded myself of the enormity of my task, I threw this letter into the rubbish, and found that for the next several days chapter four progressed wonderfully, reaching a point where the internal constructions were such that I was able to form parallels between various parts of my material and, with this in mind, had just begun to look at the interview with K again when, as though the devil himself were intervening, the telephone rang, which I couldn't prevent myself from answering. It was K himself, explaining he now felt that when I interviewed him he hadn't told me everything about his family or himself, he hadn't told me enough and he wanted to come over to my place, he'd even purchased his own tape-recorder, in order to set the record straight. I told him not to do so, I had as much information as I could possibly use and he wasn't to come anywhere near my apartment, the whereabouts of which he unfortunately already knew. "But," he insisted, "in that interview I told you a series of lies! And I never told you about my uncle so and so who raped my mother! And I never told you about this and that!" I interrupted, "Save your breath, K, whatever you did tell me will do perfectly well for the purposes of my thesis." He continued, "No, it won't, Barbara, I have to come over and see you again," and put down the telephone, so that for the next several hours I waited suspended, unable even to raise my pen, and when finally he knocked on my apartment door later that day I decided I would not open to him, he was totally uninvited, nothing but a nuisance, but K persisted embarrassingly, ignoring me when I told him to go away, knocking on and off for the next three hours until the people across the hall to whom I'd never once spoken opened their door and glared at him, as I saw through the peep-hole, at which I finally opened my door and let him into the apartment. "Thanks, Barbara!" he said panting revoltingly as though he'd just been running, "Thank you for giving me a moment of your time. That is all I want." I assured him he would not be allowed to stay for more than five minutes. "I've made a tape," he said, "you may regard it as a supplement to my previous interview if you like," and he handed me the little disc and would have said more, but I fixed him with a look and told him that as far as I was concerned his usefulness to me as a person had ceased the day our interview finished and now, as far as I was concerned, he existed only as words on a page, to be interpreted. As I bundled him out of my apartment K reported, "Listen to the tape! I think it will explain a lot of things," and indeed he had been clever enough to understand a weakness about me: if he had simply continued to present himself in person at the door, or if he had waited to waylay me during my occasional appearances in the street, I would have been able to ignore him, as I would have if he had spoken to me anywhere else, if he had telephoned again I would have hung up on him, but once he recorded himself he had as much as authorised himself, and I found that in the end I could not resist listening to the tape for what it might tell me. And so I switched it on: "Dear Barbara," it began, "I'm afraid that what I told you during our recent interview was nothing but a series of lies" - at this point he coughed - "or fantasies, I suppose, that I invented in order to make what has been up until now a very dull life seem not quite so purposeless. I've thought about this at length and wouldn't have said anything, but since I find you such a fascinating person and another lonely person, just like myself, I've realised I couldn't live with myself knowing I might distort the findings of your thesis so badly." And so the tape continued for almost the next hour, absurdly, ineptly and gormlessly relating incidents, exceedingly boring, that he claimed had "actually" happened in his childhood, until finally it came to some point: "What I really want to say is that, during our short time together, I" - here a nervous laugh - "really fell for you, I started to have feelings for you, and I think it is pretty important that we get back together again. Because I love you. Love, K." I switched off the tape and rewound it because I'd decided I needed to transcribe this material, it couldn't be ignored after all, in context it said something about the way in which an inscriber could not help but be marked by what she inscribed, that the very act of recording would always alter the record so that, in effect, the story would change beyond any concept of truth or accuracy. K had done me a significant service by alerting me to my complacency in thinking I may ever finalise the inscription. When K rang again later in the week I was a little less abrupt, thanking him for what he'd told me and telling him that it had cleared up something for me. "Not that I didn't know it already," I added, and K replied stupidly, I thought, "Did you already realise it?" I said, "Yes, what do you expect, I've devoted my life to such recognitions." But to this K answered, "I had no idea you were such a passionate person, that's all I need to hear," and before I could help it, had hung up the telephone with very much the wrong impression. But I now put all incidents to do with K out of my mind, no such nonsense would prevent my completion of chapter four, for which, since it embodied such sophisticated and complex ideas, I knew I'd need total privacy and concentration, and especially since, on account of the responses of people like O and K, and the recognition that every recording altered the record, I was coming to a vast new recognition, that after all my recordings and transcriptions of interviews of so many hundreds and hundreds of thousands of words, in which I'd asked the occasional question and often received, it now appeared, the dishonest dysfunctional response, it was not what my interviewees had said and I had transcribed, nor what I had written at any point that was of significance, but what they and I had not said, it was not in text but always in the absence of text that the substance of my thesis lay, and unless I could somehow say what had not been said, and could never be said, I'd never be able to say what needed to be said. I began to realise this was precisely what O

had been endeavouring to tell me before she died, but the realisation that, after all, my task was vast beyond anything I had up to that point imagined, stopped me in my tracks: the thesis would have to consist not of what I had written or was going to write, but of everything I hadn't and was unable to write. How would I ever do it? For four hours I sat frozen with my pen raised just above the "t" I could not cross, since I began to think that to add text to what I had already inscribed would only succeed in reducing what had not been said, which would always be what most needed saying, and every new word I wrote reduced what was absent from the thesis, while if what I ought to do was increase the presence in my thesis of what had not and could not be said, it followed that I should never say anything, implying as strongly as possible the presence of absence, which most needed to be present, but could only ever appear as itself. For this reason I went back to the very beginning of chapter one of my thesis and applied a simple test: wherever the presence of absent text could be better indicated by being absent, it was necessary to make it absent, or in fact to erase it. I began this job on the page by crossing out the first word I had inscribed, then crossed out the second, third and fourth words, and so on, and had advanced to crossing out entire sentences from what had been the twenty-fifth page, and only stopped temporarily when I received a rather irritating telephone call. It was from interviewee M, an insignificant, middle-aged, but rather self-important man who had yielded a very poor interview in the first place and now began by expressing surprise that he hadn't heard back from me since the conclusion of his interview. He asked that I provide him with a copy of the transcript of his interview as soon as I might have it ready, saying that he thought, since so much time had passed since the interview had taken place, I should probably have a copy available immediately and he'd appreciate it if I could go to the post with it as soon as possible as he himself had undertaken the arduous task of writing an autobiography. Having been interrupted from the job of erasing my thesis by such a ridiculous request as this I was shocked; I replied no, I would definitely not provide him with a copy of his interview. Did he think I had undertaken my work for his benefit? His was, in any case, a most unrevealing interview and he was far too young to be writing an autobiography. The silly man hung up on me straight away and I returned to my thesis, sometimes removing letters, sometimes words, sometimes whole sentences, but always erasing everything I had written, with the conviction that disinscribed text was the only option I had and would best convey what I meant. I would as soon have left the world out there, consisting of such as my supervisor, O, K and M, and entered the page to live among text, so that, I suppose, I could myself be crossed out in turn at some point, if it were possible, but as it was, try as I may, it seemed I'd never be able to escape to do this, and by the time I had progressively crossed out a good third of the thesis that had so far been written, I knew I was simply not going to be left alone to carry out this strenuous work, the first sign of which I had coming in the post. It was another letter from the brother of O saying he had reconsidered his earlier decision and now felt it was best to respect his late sister's wishes, and asked that I contact him as soon as possible to discuss a manner in which the tapes and any transcripts of her interview could be destroyed. If I did not respond to this letter in what he regarded as a reasonable period of time he would reinstitute legal action against me. I could not believe it! Bloody O, bloody O's family, would never leave me alone, but there was no way I would conspire to have this material destroyed, there was a world of difference between destruction and careful erasure, and I could not be a party to the former. So once again my real work on the thesis was delayed as I had to respond to the problems of O's family, but I imagine I could have handled this much stress and distraction, if it hadn't been that, just as I was writing my reply to O's brother, a very insistent knock came on the door, which turned out to be, as I checked through the peep-hole, that nuisance K again, and rather than have a repeat of his previous performance I let him in immediately, so that he sat down on the floor and told me he loved me too. "Too!" I repeated, "Who else loves me and why?" to which he replied, now tearful, "Are you trying to tell me you already have someone else?" It took me several hours to get rid of the ridiculous K again, but by this point I was unfortunately completely distracted from my erasure of the thesis, so upset I was unable to take up the job again. My bad mood, which continued for days, was only worsened by a stinging letter received from a solicitor acting on behalf of M, who demanded receipt of a copy of transcripts of his client's interviews, conducted on such and such a date, or else, and was delivered the final blow, ironically, by a relatively mild telephone call from none other than Professor Wilenski. How was I going after all this time? he wanted to know, to which I replied that, up until recent events I'd been doing very well, having begun a process of "disinscription." What was that? he asked, and I explained that, in order to convey the absence that my writing implied, I was systematically erasing, or crossing out my thesis. "No, Barbara," he said, "you can't do it! You'll end up with nothing, after all these years of work!" and hanging up the telephone, it was only then that the ghastly dimensions of what I was doing truly struck me. How, I asked myself, would I ever convey the absence in my text if my text were absolutely absent? It may be an achievement to have done this, but it was not likely to be an achievement that was possible to convey to anyone other than, perhaps, Professor Wilenski, who had seen more of my thesis than anyone, it would in fact be an entirely unknown achievement, and as I thought of it, I did not think I could live with it; I thought, if anything, now was the time to die.

*The Thesis* will be published by New Endeavour Press later this year.

**TEXT**

**Vol 2 No 1 April 1998**

**<http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text/>**

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## Glenda Guest

### *The Order of Things*

Christmas is just too much, especially in the inland heat. She clicks a tape into the deck, hangs a card on the string tacked to the sideboard and opens the Christmas Book to check the order of things. The pages are altered and overwritten, changed by generations of women, but through the tangle of browning ink and faded pencil the original plan can be read.

*I'm dreaming of a white Christmas* circles the house just like the ones we used to know...

She takes the chicken out of the fridge, to take the chill off before stuffing, and turns on the oven.

*Chop the onions, turkey, chook heart and liver and mushrooms* Cutting up the heart and liver makes her feel like a cannibal. Chicken, her mother calls her. My chick. Here, chick, chick, chick. They call her up from the yard and the chooks come running as well, looking for food. The bantams are her favourites. Small, dark and edgy, they feel like her family as they follow her around the farm. Push the chopped heart and liver to one side of the board and peel the onion. Tears drip. Onion layers, like him. Take off the brown skin and there's a paler one, then another and another, until at last there's nothing but a pile of layers with no centre.

The big knife reduces the onion to small pieces. *Slice 6 ounces of mushrooms* Mushroom fairy rings in the autumn, not now, not in December heat.

Hot enough to cook the chook on the tank stand, he says.

*Santa Claus is coming to town.*

Mother sings around home a lot. Especially at night. There is a fire in the grate in the other room when Mother is singing. Inland nights get cold she says and throws a mallee root onto the flames. Home is close the gate, better get home to feed the chooks, do the milking. *Cook mushrooms with the onions and chopped chicken heart and liver.*

The can of chestnut puree is next. She holds it up, looks at the picture of a woman holding up a can of chestnut puree, then looks closer at the can held by the picture woman. Another woman holds a can of puree; waits to use it in stuffing for her Christmas dinner. A high, thready note like the strike of a tuning fork leads her to the next woman who smiles and waves the can at her. She holds tightly to the thread going down through silver- grey air until she steps into the next picture and is waved on again, and again and again. Reflective tin-ness surrounds her broken only by the rhythmic passing of can holding women who smile as they display the next can. On and on, reaching for the first. How many generations of cans? She looks down the thread, down a telescope the wrong way, trying to see who posed for the painting of the first label.

Am I on a can being looked at by a woman with bantam black hair pulled up into a knot? Maybe my can will be opened, and when the contents are used, thrown to the darkness of the dustbin. The label is glued fast as she tears at it, looking for the underneath. The small can distorts her reflection, stretching her face around its surface. There I am. A bit out of shape. But there.

*days be merry and bright*

*Stir the chestnut puree together with the pate.* She stirs, and fragments of England and Europe fly out of the bowl. The spire of the Eiffel Tower shakes off a piece of the Union Jack. Irish cottages line the broad avenues of Berlin. Dutch tulips, Spanish onions, Scotch Thistle flower in the middle of a Barcelonan bull ring. The flowers grow more profuse as the matador's blade flashes red. She tries to blend a homogenous mix but pieces still separate. She whisks harder. A bubbling, cacophonous mass fills the kitchen and overflows through the door onto the verandah. She stands aside and waits, expecting collapse when it hits the heat of the inland December sun. Bing Crosby sings in Swedish and Russian, French and Swahili. Notes of the refrain hover over the bowl like crows trying to land. Each one settles onto the surface and sinks. Faster they land, faster they sink until there's a torrent of blackness pouring into the mass, taking the surrounding air with them until it's hard to breathe. She holds back the chairs and books, lamp stands and tables that are wanting to follow and works her way to the tape deck where she pushes the rewind button so that the notes are recalled, flying backwards into the form of the song, and the air again becomes sweet and dry and the heat of the kitchen is briefly welcome.

*hear sleigh bells in the snow*

*Fill the cavity of the bird with the stuffing* She sews the opening with a bag needle threaded with fine string. As she opens the oven heat blasts into the already stifling kitchen and her perspiration sizzles angrily on the glass of the door.

She chirps along...*Santa Claus is coming*

If he makes it this year. Hasn't for as long as she can remember. As a nipper she sits on the verandah up before day break just in case. That's why, he says, waiting up for him just makes him not come.

The next year she lies in bed, eyes tightly clenched. You must have been naughty. You know Santa don't come to naughty kids.

Miss Perfect for the next twelve months. But it doesn't make any difference. So she gives up.

Every night after dinner he sits there reading from the bible. *In the name of the father, son and holy ghost, amen.* She likes the sonority of the reading, not listening to the words but rocking on the rhythm. His voice changes when he reads, becomes part of the wordscape. From her perch on the rail under the kitchen table she watches him with half closed lids that hide round ginger-brown eyes, waiting for the change when he slams the book shut.

*he knows when you've been bad or good He knows when you've been bad or good He knows when you've been bad or good He knows when you've been bad or good He knows*

You're a really bad girl.

Why did you do that, eh. Why.

Why.

Listen to me when I speak to you.

Stop that blasted humming

You'll be punished god

will

punish

you there'll be no Santa this Christmas not for you anyway bad bad sit still stop humming stop singing stop.

*so be good for goodness sake* she echoes as the tape player hiccups and slows.

Washing carrots in the sink. She likes chopping carrots, likes the smooth shape, the rhythm of the down-up down-up - the machine made between her hands and the flashing knife that takes control, biting into the pale browny-white of the wooden board slicing the root into smooth, equal rings. *you are my sunshine, my only sunshine* she sings with mother, the refrain taking control of the knife. *you make me happy, when skies are grey.* Add two teaspoons of honey and a knob of butter to the carrots when they are just cooked. Makes them something special - concentrates the taste somehow.

Peel potatoes. Throw them into the saucepan of water. Plant potatoes. Dig in mulch and manure. Change the dirt into rich soil. Cut the seed potatoes into pieces. Make sure there is at least one eye to each piece. Plant in rows of mounded earth. Wait for sunshine and rain to grow them. Dig the new potatoes. Lift the connecting stems dangling with the small brown roots. Like all goodness has arrived in one spot. Scrub the tiny potatoes and boil them in lots of water with salt then toss them in melted butter and rosemary.

Fit for a king Mother says.

Make the custard. *beat eggs, sugar, vanilla together* She likes this combining of ordinary things into something else. *Add warmed milk and stir until thickened.* Something rich and strange from such basic elements. Stirring with the big spoon makes her feel like a witch at her cauldron. Like the hag in Hansel and Gretel. Or the Wicked Witch of the West. She likes being the witch galloping around the yard on a broomstick with chooks and bantams rushing around squawking and geese hissing and flapping at her. The cape found in the dress up box flies behind with a satisfying rush and flap. Make sure you're not doing this when your dad gets home, he'll cut up the cape if he sees it.

He likes cutting things up. Cuts up the chook at the table. Cuts off the head first. Come and hold it girl, so I cut clean.

*the ones I used to know...*



She sings herself out of the kitchen into the dining room, takes table linen from the drawer and sets up the ironing board. *iron cloth just before covering table, to avoid unsightly creases.* In the Book this is crossed out by her mother but she still follows it, feeling connected to the brown, spidery writing.

*iron on the wrong side, on a towel so the pattern stands out* The heat of the iron on the old damask makes the pattern rise above the fabric, expanding into a lacy white cloud that hovers several feet below ceiling level. Notes from the tape deck spin out, spiralling up to the cloud and down into the gaps left lying on the ironing board. The rhythm of the song changes and she spreads as she joins it, black hair feathering as, note by note, she follows the spiral upwards. She expands and opens to the hanging pattern as prickles of notes surge though the spaces and attach to each other by their tails. She, cloud, notes, she cloud notes shecloudnotes swirl together and together around the room, until the tape deck stops and the lace cloud settles back into the gaps, the cloth not quite the same as before. She shakes the linen onto the table and flicks off a note *I'm* that has stuck in the pattern.

Three places at the table set with green placemats with scalloped edges and a motif of a wintery santa at one end. Him at the end with his back to the door looking into the kitchen. Carving the chook into wings and drumsticks, dark meat and breast. Breast or bum end for you girl? Whadaya want this year eh?

Mother at the other end with the view out the door and window across the brown yard, past the three bar gate, over the salt lake to the horizon.

Herself on the side with her back to the window, able to look at them both and see the chook house behind her own reflection of shiny feather-black hair and round bright eyes in the mirror over the side board.

Turn the page.

*polish the silver as you lay it.* A small, hot breeze scatters Christmas cards to the floor, and she turns up the volume on the tape deck. Her mother always polishes the silver, keeps it shining all the time. Be careful with the knives, pet. Your Dad likes them sharp. Lots of elbow grease to keep away the tarnish. Wish mother was here to do it. She wants her to be here. She pushes away edges of black veil that hang to the waist, over the good black dress.

A fine layer of dust blows through the house, tickling her beaky nose to make her sneeze, and into the tape deck so that it slows a little, fighting its way through the unexpected brake.

She can't find the silver cleaner so she fills the sink with hot water, adds detergent and throws in the cutlery. Knives forks spoons fill the sink in a jumble which she sullenly scrubs and places in the draining board.

Mind your fingers on the knives.

The teatowel becomes black with tarnish as she wipes each piece, rubbing between the tines of each fork, digging her finger nail into the slot between the knife blade and the handle. Each piece is laid on a clean teatowel and covered with another, ready for the table.

*you'd better not pout I'm telling you why*

*baste the chicken every twenty minutes* Heat pours from the oven as she opens the door and spoons sizzling fat over the browning bird. A splodge of hot fat hits her arm.

*You better not shout, you better not cry* Only babies cry. What are you crying about. Tears don't do anything. You should be more careful, careful. Don't cry, baby, my chick.

*better watch out I'm telling you why* Hot wind bangs at the windows and doors, pushing fine sand and dust through cracks and tossing the hanging decorations. In the dining room she shakes dust off the placemats and lays the nearly clean cutlery. As she places a knife on the table it nicks her little finger and a spot of blood makes a dark mark on the green mat. She moves the knife slightly to cover it.

She takes tall crystal glasses from the back of the sideboard and carries them to the kitchen sink. *Wash crystal glasses one at a time and dry with a linen cloth so lint pieces don't stick.* Those glasses are your father's pride and joy. Wash gently and dry. Carry one in each hand to the table. Three glasses. Two trips. Be careful.

*better watch out better watch out better watch out better watch out* the tape deck sticks as she carefully carries the glasses to the table. She holds high the third glass, so that it trembles slightly in the hot wind, then throws it at the tape deck where it shatters with a high, keening note, and knife sharp shards of fine crystal take flight in lines of pain to bury themselves in her leg. *m y y r d y s b m rry* The flying glass picks up the notes and throws them in disarray, fragmenting the song until it is not to be recognised.

In the kitchen the oven glows red.

Always take care around the kitchen love turn saucepan handles in don't take anything out of the oven with a wet cloth or you'll steam yourself check the oven carefully so things don't catch fire make sure the hotplates are off don't put teatowels on the stove top take care take care.

The oven door opens. The pan slides out, spewing hot fat, and the chicken hits the floor running. *dark as a bantam chick* Notes of music, lost by being single, find the chicken and cling to it, trying to form a melody *jus...li...I... ow* but lose their grip and are thrown off the frantic bird. The oven breathes in, draws a mouthful of Christmas cards. Edges brown and curl as rivulets of heat run across the pages, burst with red and fly back into the room. Rushes of wind push them into the cupboards and onto the Christmas Book which blackens and chars as it is sucked into the tornado of knives, forks and black notes.

Notes find her and their tails needle into her skin. They attach and overlap, transforming into a coat of black feathers. Her feet make claws to hold her to the rail under the table as she resists the swirling wind and as she clings there the Christmas Book spins out of the vortex and hits her on the chest above the heart, leaving a white ghosting of text on the coat of glossy black.

Unable to breathe, she tries to shake the notes away but they pile layer upon layer, weighing her down until she becomes a pile of smokey, acrid feathers. The flames lick up the walls and the feather-pile shrinks to ash, to a black smudge, to an egg shaped hole that the running chicken, rampant in red and gold streamers, recognises and settles over with brooding in mind.

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**TEXT**

**Vol 2 No 1 April 1998**

**<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>**

**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady**

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La Trobe University

## Molly Travers

### *Regeneration*

'I'm going down the garden,' down along the verandah, past the sickly sweet silence of my grandmother's bedroom, past Nanny's high iron bed with the mosquito netting hanging from a hoop attached to the roof - for Nanny slept outside my grandmother's room in case she called in the night; down the path between the roses, larkspurs and hollyhocks; through the latch-gate of old gray wood and chicken wire; between the overgrown white may hedge that lashed you with soaking branches after rain; under the wildly riotous pink tecoma vine; and into the dunny, the longdrop, the outhouse. There all was quiet except for the songthrush and wren. The scent of may blossom floated on the air. The seat was a smooth wooden bench with a round hole polished by generations of bare behinds. Whatever was down that hole was lost in blackness so dense that you couldn't even see the pieces of torn white newspaper. Nothing seemed to be in there. The whole family's contributions disappeared without trace. In fact, as a child, I'm not sure I ever thought about them. Until now, I haven't wondered why, but it's obvious. In the normal order of things, there it all is until you flush. But with the longdrop, it's gone forever; gone into the roots of the tecoma that covered the little hut in twenty feet of massive trunk and branches, and a profusion of the most magnificent pink flowers.

[from *Scriptorium: Selected work from Harvard University's Summer Writing Program*, Issue 4 (1997) p4]

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## University of Sydney

### M.T.C. Cronin

#### *the law of open gates*

I have been keeping guard  
at the exact spot where my  
mind has its dealings with  
the world. It is where I have  
been taught the small oddness  
between red and blue and  
where the medium of the edge is  
thick with the chill of outdoors.  
Strange, it is also the place  
my mind finds most evident  
in silence and I cannot bear  
its invitation which reads like  
the epitaph of a great and  
singular mountain - there is  
nothing to account for the  
metaphors that arise in you  
at such times and there is  
nothing to be gained by  
choosing another more  
easily moved. At this open  
gate I sometimes sit and  
take water and a little food  
and think on the facts that  
people will die and still die -  
I could go there myself and  
leave the gate clanging behind  
but I do not yet want to lose  
any part of the issue and so  
firmly draw the line of the body  
around me. Sometimes I wonder  
when balancing here about  
where I am originally from but  
do not let the broad principles  
settle anywhere for long - all

kinds of things can be done by  
relating one person's fictional  
character to another person's  
fictional character but I cannot  
go on the ferry - my child died  
there in a dream. From where  
I stand she is asking where she  
fits but the engine simply roars  
and leaves the question in its  
wake. I see only a bit of all this.

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