Tell the Queen I'm Sorry
Olive Senior

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi
Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Senior, Olive, Tell the Queen I'm Sorry, Kunapipi, 16(1), 1994.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/71

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Tell the Queen I'm Sorry

Abstract
Every afternoon just before four o'clock, Uncle got ready to go out. Not that he needed much preparation. He had never taken off his three-piece suit since he got back from England so all he had to do was put on his bowler hat and take up his walking stick and gloves. But even these simple actions were imbued with great purpose and deliberation, as was everything that Uncle did. His hat set at the right angle, his gloves precisely delineated in his right hand in relation to his cane, he would set out.

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/71
Every afternoon just before four o’clock, Uncle got ready to go out. Not that he needed much preparation. He had never taken off his three-piece suit since he got back from England so all he had to do was put on his bowler hat and take up his walking stick and gloves. But even these simple actions were imbued with great purpose and deliberation, as was everything that Uncle did. His hat set at the right angle, his gloves precisely delineated in his right hand in relation to his cane, he would set out.

‘Good afternoon to you, Girlie,’ he would call out in his deep melodious voice.

‘Good afternoon, Uncle,’ I would say, coming out of my bedroom where I was studying to watch him set off.

Ramrod stiff, Uncle would walk down the three concrete steps onto the path to the road, never missing a beat, behaving exactly, I am sure, as if he were going for a walk in Piccadilly Circus. The only difference is that here there was no pavement, in fact there wasn’t much of a road, only a track covered with stones and marl with no drainage so the sides of the road were deeply rutted from the water which formed channels there every time it rained. It was a good thing there was so little traffic, because the only place to walk was in the middle of the road. None of this seemed to bother Uncle. He would step into the road swinging his cane, heedless of what the sharp rocks were doing to his highly polished English shoes or the dust from the marl was doing to his clothes. Stepping stiffly and precisely, he would walk the mile and a half to the square, lifting his hat in greeting to everyone he passed, smiling his smile that never wavered because it was fixed on his face, turned forever inward. At the square he would walk down one side, turn precisely at the corner, cross the road and come up the other side and head for home again, resisting with a slight inclination of his head the blandishments of the men inside the bar - Grampa’s friends – to come in and have a drink. Uncle would simply smile his smile, nod and pass on; he never spoke to anyone on his walk.

Uncle didn’t walk like anyone else; he held his body so stiffly, he was exactly like the little wind-up toy man I once had which moved with a mechanical jerk of its hands and feet. That’s how Uncle walked. He held himself stiffly at all times, even when he was sitting down. I had never
once seen him relax his posture, as none of us had ever seen him out of his three-piece suit.

For the first few days after Uncle came back from England, nobody thought too much about his behaviour. Everyone knew that he would need time to adjust to being back home after twenty years and expected that as soon as the stiffness and strangeness wore off, Uncle would start behaving like a normal person again. From the start though, Gran had tried to get him to take off his suit and his vest and his tie, she couldn't imagine how he wasn't boiling in those heavy black English woollen clothes, she said. She hadn't seen any other clothes, because although he came back with a trunk, he hadn't taken anything out except pyjamas and a robe, toilet articles and a fancy comb and brush set, and he kept it locked. She had offered to unpack his things, air out and hang up his clothes and iron what needed ironing. 'No, thank you Mother,' he said and she was so awed by her son come home from England that she didn't press him. She did try again by offering him one of his father's cambric shirts and khaki pants to put on, as well as a pair of his shoes for they still wore the same size, thinking perhaps that he had no tropical clothing, but again he said, 'No, thank you Mother,' and that was that. His voice was fruity and melodious, so cultured, so precise, I thought, as if he formed the words around a ripe plum in his mouth. 'No, thank you' was all he ever said but even that I loved to hear him say.

'Take him a little time to unwind and get used to our ways again,' I heard Gran telling Grampa every night, 'soon get back to normal.'

Grampa didn't answer. Grampa wasn't used to saying much except on Friday nights when he went down to Mr Ramsay's bar and drank white rum. Then he became loquacious enough, noisy even, and could sometimes be heard loudly disputing with his friend Mr Anderson as late at night, they both staggered up the road, drunk. Gran who would be lying in bed, listening, would sigh and shake her head, get up and turn up the lamp which she had left burning low and hurry back into bed and pretend to be asleep when Grampa came staggering in. She never said anything to him about Friday nights because other than that, he gave her much to complain about. 'Not like when we were young, O boy,' she would say, 'that man made me cry the living eye water every day.' But Grampa had mellowed with age and now hardly spoke at all. Uncle didn't speak either, unless he was spoken to. Then, no matter what was said or offered he would say, 'No, thank you.'

I was the only one to whom Uncle said anything more and I never knew why. But Gran said he had been close to my mother before he went away and though she was dead now, I was the spitting image of her. Sometimes I wondered if Uncle thought I was the little sister he had left behind, for they called her Girlie too.

When Uncle first came back I was on Easter holidays and out of curiosity, I sometimes hung around the verandah where he sat, ramrod
stiff, hoping he would say something to me. He sat on the chair all day long, smiling his secret smile, never relaxing his pose until Gran called him to the table for a meal. Then he would come and sit stiffly at the table and go through the pretence of eating, but hardly anything ever passed his lips. Even with all the clothes he wore, you could see that Uncle was very thin.

For a long time he never gave any indication that he noticed me at all. Then one afternoon as I was passing his door I was astonished to hear him call out, 'Come here, Girlie, and listen to my heart.'

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, I went and pressed my ear to his chest. 'What do you hear?' he asked.

'It's beating, Uncle,' I said, for what else was there to say?

'No Girlie, you are wrong,' he said. 'That's not my heart you hear beating. I don't have a heart any more. That's a mechanical contrivance they put inside of me. Ticking like a clock. They took my heart out when I went into the hospital there, the doctors attached some wires to my head and when I was unconscious they took my heart out and put in this machine.' I would have believed this astonishing news were true if he hadn't continued. 'I never asked them to do that, Girlie. I never asked them. It was advantage-taking to the highest degree. I wrote to the Queen about it. Forty letters I wrote to the Queen. And you know what the Queen wrote me back to say?'

He was waiting for a response so I dutifully said, 'No, Uncle.'

The Queen, Girlie, wrote back to say it was none of her business. Can you countenance that? Isn't she supposed to be the Queen of us all down to the humblest? Don't we all walk with money in our pockets with her face on it? Millions and millions of people all over the world carrying her face in their pockets. And then to say it is none of her business that her doctors in her hospital – Royal it says in large letters outside for everyone to see – her doctors take away my heart and put a clock inside. You think that is right, Girlie? I have to be careful how I drink you know. For the rest of my life I have to be careful. For suppose the machine they put inside of me starts to rust? But I'll never give up Girlie. If I have to spend my whole life seeking justice, that I will do. One day I will show you my entire correspondence with the Queen.'

'Yes, Uncle,' I said.

Uncle pulled his watch out of his fob pocket, looked at it, and since it was precisely one minute to four he put his hat on his head, took up his gloves and walking stick. 'Good afternoon to you, Girlie,' he said and he set off on his walk.

When I told Gran what Uncle said, Gran burst into tears. 'Poor Sonny. Poor Sonny,' she said. 'What a way life hard, eh?'

Grampa didn't want to talk about their son but Gran was always forcing him to. Grampa didn't say anything but we knew he was embarrassed. Wasn't this the son he had boasted about for twenty years? When he
heard Uncle was finally coming home, hadn’t he bought a round for everyone in the bar that Friday night? Hadn’t they all bought him a round? Hadn’t Grampa got so drunk from the celebration he had to be carried home?

Grampa was extraordinarily proud of his son because while everyone had sons or daughters overseas that they were always bragging about, his son was the one with the brains, he had been saying that for twenty years, the one who was always studying. Mark you, Grampa used to get a bit vague about the studying. Uncle had left to study medicine. Many many years he spent studying. Nobody knew what happened but nothing seemed to come of it. Next thing they knew, he was studying something else. Every time they heard, he was studying something different. After a while, Grampa and Gran never really knew what Uncle did, for he hardly ever wrote home. They didn’t even know that Uncle had a wife and children until this strange woman named Clarissa wrote to say Uncle was ill and in hospital. She didn’t specify the nature of the illness and the name of the hospital meant nothing to them. After that they heard from her occasionally though she never specifically replied to any of their letters; wrote more to express her feelings at any given point in time than to assuage theirs: he was in and out of hospital, she was having a hard time with the children, well poor Sonny was never much good for anything was he? Grampa and Gran didn’t know what to make of that, so they pretended they hadn’t read it.

All along, Grampa pretended; he was always announcing good news of his son, boasting of his grandchildren and their achievements. Everyone knew he was pretending since who got letters from abroad and who didn’t was an open secret shared with all by Postmistress, but nobody ever let him know that they knew, for a lot of people with children overseas had had to resort to the same type of face-saving from time to time. It was just that Grampa had been doing it for longer than most. Over the years, he continued to make up news of his son to tell to his cronies. And they went and dutifully told their wives as if it were truth, so then Gran had to end up lying as well. For the ladies would say to her after church.

‘My my, Miss Margaret, I hear Sonny get another big job, eh?’

‘Well yes, Miss Dorcas,’ she’d say, ‘you can’t keep a good man down.’

But Gran would try to hurry off before the discussion got too deep, because she never knew what news Grampa had manufactured about Uncle this time and she was afraid of getting it all wrong. She didn’t quarrel with Grampa because a man had to have something to boast about and others in the district were always making them so angry, what with their children coming home or sending them gifts. Every day somebody would pass by on the road with something or other they had got from foreign, just to torment them it seemed. The boys would walk with their shirt sleeves rolled up to show off new wristwatches, the girls would wear
their new high heel shoes, they’d walk with radios to their ears and that silly girl even tried to push her baby in a pram down the rocky road, sent by her equally silly sister from Birmingham. It was worse when new things came in: television sets (even before they had electricity, or indeed, a television station), refrigerators and stereograms. Not to mention all their fancy clothing, new curtains and bedspreads.

Grampa and Gran were embarrassed that they had never got anything from their son abroad. So when Uncle’s wife wrote and said she was sending him home because she couldn’t do any more, they went off to meet him still hoping against hope that he would bring them a truckload of gifts to make up for all the years of deprivation. It wasn’t that they really wanted anything. It was a matter of principle; they needed things to show off with. Just like everybody else.

Before Uncle came home, Gran used to hold him up as an object lesson to me. ‘See there Girlie, see where you can reach if you study and apply yourself. Reach to England. Go all to university like your Uncle Sonny. You stick to the books there, girl.’

After Uncle returned with nothing but a trunk which he kept locked and they saw how he was, Gran changed her advice. I don’t know at what stage Gran decided that Uncle was mad, though at first she never ever used that word. What she said was that Uncle was suffering from ‘brain strain’ which everybody knew was caused from too much studying. So whereas before she was always urging me to study, was always checking on my progress, now she worried constantly that I was overdoing it, that I too would strain my brain. ‘Remember what happen to your uncle,’ she would say from time to time, ‘you better pack up the books now and go to bed.’

At night though, when she talked to Grampa in their room beside mine and I listened through the wall, she was turning different theories over in her head, I could see that. Gran and Grampa hardly seemed to sleep and I would always be surprised to come awake and hear Gran talking in the middle of the night in her normal conversational voice. ‘Johnnie,’ she would say to Grampa, ‘You think we did push Sonny too hard when he was little? You think we did ask too much of him? He really never have time to play like them other little boys around, you know. He was always a serious little fellow, serious from the day he was born.’

I settled down to listen to Gran, as if to keep her company, for even if Grampa were awake he would never answer her, except to grunt now and then or if she went on too long to angrily say, ‘Woman, why you don’t shut up and let a man get his sleep?’ Sometimes, it was as if Gran never heard him, she would continue to talk aloud for hours. I would try to stay awake and listen, in case Gran said something about my mother; my mother died when she had me so I never knew her, and Gran never liked to talk about her, so all I knew was what I heard Gran say when she...
thought nobody but Grampa was listening. But since Uncle came home, he was all she talked about.

"He wasn't even a year yet when Girlie born. But Sonny never give a day's trouble, he must have known his poor mother never had no time to fuss over him," she would say. "That Girlie! She took up all my strength. The minute she get over one sickness she get another. Never know she would make it through her first two year. I never had time for that little Sonny, but I never see a child tough so. Sonny never cry. And from he was little he was helpful. Never a day's trouble. He was a perfect child."

Gran would fall silent for a while, thinking, no doubt, of her two lost children, and I would be falling asleep again when her voice would rouse me back to wakefulness.

"But Johnnie, talk truth now. You don't think we did use him too hard from he was little, seeing how he was the one boy pickney? Remember how he used to get up from dew-fall to go to the spring for water? Then he had was to get rabbit feeding. Then he go look wood and tie out the goat. Then he walk the five mile to school for is clear to Ramble he had to go for no school was here those days and no bus neither. Then he come home and he running around again till night dark you have to say. Then he spend half the night studying. Remember Johnnie? And you was hard on him, you know. Used to beat him for blind for the slightest thing. Old man, your temper was well short those days."

Grampa would groan loudly from his side of the bed as if he were being tortured but Gran would ignore him. He did always want to succeed. From he was little he would tell me, "Mamie. I am going to be a doctor. I am going to be a big important man. Going to make you and Papa proud of me." And I would say, "Yes. Yes mi son. Be a doctor for you Mamie and Papa." I would sit up night after night with him beating the books there till he pass the scholarship to school. I was proud that I had such a serious boy. Never grinny-grinny and playey-playey like those other children around. Walk and hold himself straight from those days. Like a little soldier."

"Lawd woman, is foreign mad him," Grampa would finally snap out, goaded beyond endurance into speech. "What you want to go into all them old-time story for? What is past is past. The boy leave here good-good you full well know. Don't is the two of we did walk with him to Number Two pier and watch him board the ship? The SS Caroni. I will never forget the day. We send off a good-good boy to England dress in him suit and tie, looking like a little Englishman before him even reach. Is them place there mash him up. People not suppose to go so far from home. It weaken yu constitution. You nuh see how much people round here gone mad from foreign?"

What Grampa said made me think. I started to think of all the people around we knew who had gone away and come back. And several that I could think of were what we would call 'not righted'. Miss Pringle's
daughter Gloria came back from the States walking and talking to herself, acting like mad ants all day long until she went right off her head and the Black Maria had to come and take her in straightjacket to Bellevue. Bagman who was somebody's pickney as he often told us though everyone had forgotten whose, Bagman dressed in crocus bag clothes black and stiff with dirt and slept on the pavement outside Chin's hardware shop and didn't trouble a soul unless it was full moon when he went into the banana field behind the shop and brayed like a donkey. Bagman had gone to England to fight in the war and that's how he came back. Mr Robinson had a son in Bellevue who had also gone to England to study and Miss Mary's daughter had killed herself and her two babies in England after her husband left her for another lady. If I weren't so sleepy I'm sure I could remember others. So many of them it seemed, and they had all gone away somewhere. Was there something in the atmosphere of foreign that made people go mad, as Grampa was suggesting?

I was interested in the topic because I wanted to go away myself, wanted to go to England to study. But I had no intention of going mad though I could see myself learning to talk rich and fruity like Uncle. That was what I liked best about him. But I was also sorry for him. I truly wanted to know what had happened to make him act the way he did. I used to imagine from the way he walked that he was holding all his pain in, that if he could only talk about it, spill it all, his body would come all relaxed and plastic again. But Uncle never talked. And after a while, nobody talked to Uncle. Well, Grampa wasn't given to talking anyway, though when Uncle first came, he tried. But increasingly as Grampa realised that Uncle was mad, you could see him drawing up everything inside himself, the same way Uncle had done, for Grampa was ashamed. He was ashamed because Uncle wasn't keeping his madness at home. He would have felt better, he told Gran one night, if Uncle had the kind of madness that you could lock up, so nobody would know about it. But no one could keep Uncle off the road, he went parading his madness every day for all the world to see.

After only a few weeks, everyone in fact accepted that Uncle was mad. They stopped calling him 'Mister Sonny' and 'Doctor' and 'Sir' which they'd called him when he first came. Now he was plain 'Sonny' to everyone including the little children who would trail behind him mimicking his stiff-legged gait, his fixed smile. The adults were more tolerant, though they shouted out things good-humouredly as he passed. Then he became such a fixture that they no longer noticed him. Uncle after a few months had become a local 'character', like Bagman or Turnfoot Tiny.

But what Grampa found really unbearable was that his drinking buddies in the bar simply ceased referring to Uncle in his presence. They behaved as if the son he had talked about for twenty years had suddenly vanished
from the face of the earth and their wives did likewise. Grampa was glad
that nobody talked about Uncle but at the same time he felt ashamed,
cheated and ashamed. Anything would be preferable to having a child
afflicted with madness.

Gran and Grampa would become fearful for me sometimes. Aside from
showing her nervousness about my studying too much, Gran would
say, 'Girlie dear, when you go away to high school you must never tell
anybody that you have a mad uncle. Never. For they might think you
tar with the same brush, you know. Madness can run in the family. Don't
ever let anybody know your uncle mad.'

As if I had any intention of telling anyone! I was glad I had got a
scholarship and was going away to boarding school, for having Uncle
around in the district was hard enough. I had to put up with so much
teasing from the children at school, had got into the first and only fist
fights of my life because of Uncle. I was glad I was going far away from
the problem.

Uncle began to bother me a lot because he brought into the house such
discomfort. When it had been just me and Gran and Grampa, we all
seemed to fit together so well. Now with Uncle there we all sat at
mealtimes totally silent, nobody saying a word, all three of us pretending
he wasn't there, but totally conscious of him nonetheless though his
behaviour at table or through the day never varied, so there was really
nothing to see. After his first day with us, everything Uncle did was
predictable. He would delicately cut up his food and go through the
motion of eating, but hardly anything passed his lips. I wondered how he
stayed alive. And always the three-piece suit which was getting more
ragged and dirty every day, the stiff posture, the fixed smile. I thought
that perhaps if we tried to get Uncle to talk it would help, but both Gran
and Grampa had withdrawn themselves from him; I could almost feel
them pulling away. They became as distant and silent as Uncle was, and
soon the house which had once seemed to be so warm, so full of love and
caring, now seemed empty and cold, as if nobody lived there anymore.

When I went back home each time on holidays the house seemed
emptier and emptier, the two old people and Uncle appeared to rattle
around in it like dried peas in a pod, all shrinking in their separate spaces,
deadlocked in their silences. The only thing that happened is that one day
Uncle decided to show me his correspondence with the Queen. He called
me into his room and told me to shut the door, and he unlocked the
trunk. At last I was getting to see what was inside this mysterious trunk
that held Uncle's darkest secrets. Over the years since he came, Gran and
Grampa had discussed what he could possibly have inside it. They had
probably never given up hope that it might contain some treasure, such
as the foreign goods for which they so longed.

But when Uncle opened his trunk, all that he had inside it were papers;
letters in envelopes going brown and brittle with age, the letters so
creased from handling they were falling apart; hundreds of sheets of yellowing paper covered with what I took to be Uncle's tiny and precise handwriting. He was taking all the papers out as he talked and laying them on the table, but he never really gave me a chance to look at anything for as soon as he had emptied the trunk, he immediately started putting everything back in. And he talked nonstop during all this activity.

‘Here Girlie, here are all my letters to the Queen,’ he said, waving packages of paper at me. ‘And here are her replies. But this, Girlie,’ he said, grabbing up a fistful of sheets, ‘this is my case. My case that I have been preparing for years now, all my life. Six million pounds in damages I am claiming. Don’t you think I am owed compensation? I and my children and my children’s children? I never wanted to go into that hospital, Girlie. They dragged me in there. Kidnapped me, you have to say. Inflicted indignity and disfigurement on my person. Took out my heart and put in a mechanical one. And you know why, Girlie?’ Uncle thrust his face at me and for once his eyes seemed to focus as they bore into mine.

‘No Uncle,’ I said.

‘Because those people only understand machines. That’s what I found out about them. Want to turn us all into machines. So they can work us as they like and wear us down as they like and nobody can say one little thing. Because we are not human any more. But see here, Girlie. I am making my case. I want you to take it for me. Take it to England. Take it to the Queen. You can tell her I am sorry, if you want. Tell the Queen I’m sorry to discombobulate her. But it’s a long time now I’ve been waiting for my settlement. And I can’t wait any more.’

In between talking, Uncle was putting the papers back into the trunk, and as soon as he finished, he locked it, looked at his watch, and found it was time for him to go for his walk. As far as I know, he never opened the trunk to show anyone his papers again.

I eventually had to leave Gran and Grampa and Uncle in their empty space. I went off to England and I didn’t come home again for a long time. In England, sometimes I understood a little of what might have happened to Uncle there. So many things every day that might have given him the final push. I always felt a little guilty about Uncle, guilty that I had never really come to grips with the enigma that he represented; guilty that I had never attempted to contact his wife and children when I was in England, but what would I have had to tell them?

When I went home the last time, both Gran and Grampa had died and Uncle was living by himself in the house. I went to visit him, bracing myself for the worst, but I was surprised to find that in some subtle and undefined way, the house no longer seemed as empty and cold as it had before. Uncle had changed in superficial ways; he no longer wore the suit, perhaps it had simply fallen apart; but he was still dressed formally enough, for with his short-sleeved shirt he wore braces and a tie.
he died, Grampa had given a neighbour permission to farm the land, on condition that they looked after Uncle. All they did was put food in front of him and wash his clothes, but he didn't seem to need anything else. Uncle still appeared oblivious to everything around him, still wore on his face that secret inward turning smile. Still held himself stiff as a wind-up toy and went for walks at four in the afternoon regular as clockwork, swinging his cane and lifting what was now a soft felt hat to everyone that he passed.

I was astonished that he knew exactly who I was as soon as I stepped through the door. The house was dark and gloomy and looked as though it hadn't been dusted for years. But I saw at once that Uncle had at last opened the trunk and spread out his papers; every inch of every flat space in every room – floor, beds, tables, chairs, was covered with his papers letters, envelopes and the loose sheets with the minuscule, precise handwriting.

'Girlie,' he said in greeting, 'it is almost ready. I have almost finished my case. I am getting ready to send it to the Queen.'

It seemed strange to me that the house even though it belonged to a madman and was falling apart no longer felt dry and rattling the way it had up to when I left. For me, the ghosts of Gran and Grampa were still there, and I felt sad that I would never see them again. But Uncle entertained no ghosts, for both he and the house seemed alive for the first time since he came. Behind the facade, behind the stiff soldierly gestures, a heart seemed to be beating steadily. It was as if when he finally found room to open the trunk and spread out his papers, he also, for the first time in his life, poured out his presence.