

1994

Going Back

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Recommended Citation

Crate, Joan, Going Back, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/86>

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Abstract

Eileen walks down a street wrapped in a white cape. It's the cape she bought not long before she was admitted to the hospital, when she her Terri take her shopping. 'There's this fabulous little consignment store. You've got to see it,' Terri had prattled. 'Good quality stuff and cheap. They have some dresses and suits I think yer gonna like. You've got to get some new clothes, ya know No one can find you in the old ones and you can't wear that one skirt and pair of pants that fit you forever.'

JOAN CRATE

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So Eileen had conceded, and during lunch hour they had driven to the consignment shop in Terri's Firebird since it had the advantage of signal lights and tyres with visible tread.

Once inside the dingy store, Terri swept fram rack to rack like 'Employee of the Month' on amphetamines, calling Eileen's attention to a number of dresses and suits in 5's and 7's, sizes Eileen hadn't worn since she was a kid. Terri clutched hemlines, pinched waists, demanded that Eileen examine seams, linings, the frayed tabs that gave cleaning instructions. Although Eileen tried valiantly to share Terri's enthusiasm, she was unable to. How heavy the garments looked, their fabrics rough and thick. Eileen couldn't bear the thought of them scouring her skin, pressing down her shoulders, binding her limbs, her lungs.

'No,' she said, 'I don't like them.'

And then her eyes ascended from the teal cotton, the grey corduroy, the black and burgundy wool blends that Terri had spread out before her like a dreadful smorgasbord, to a billow of pure light. The white cape.

Now she walks in it, chilled to the bone, yet light, full of air.

Eileen was unprepared for just how cold it is, and she draws the white wool closer to her skin.

Just when it seemed that Spring was here to stay, when buds appeared on trees and birds in the sky, when the bank had tacked up their 'The early bird gets to earn' bulletins for a new type of term deposit, and 'Invest in Endless Summers' posters suggesting short-term loans; just when she had started to peer hesitantly into future seasons, to talk of summer heat and possible vacations; the snow fell. The previous afternoon a frozen north wind dispensed it like a clump of bad news.

The face of the city has been changed, all sharpness erased, all colour bled. Everything: the street, traffic lights, sidewalks, cars, buildings and the sky reflect the snow's blank stare.

It's difficult to see Eileen walking in her white cape. She knows this. White against white, and she has pulled up her hood to conceal her dark hair, her face.

It's just before twelve. Mr. Mason was in a meeting, and this enabled Eileen to slip out of the office early to drive downtown. She parked the car – somewhere, she really can't remember – and caught the train into the city centre.

The traffic on the street is heavy, yet enveloped in a blanket of ice-fog it sounds and feels a great distance away. In another city perhaps, or another time. Clouds have fallen into the streets, isolating the people from the place, feet from the sidewalks, cars from asphalt. Eileen is encased in cloud, has become cloud with edges difficult to define.

She lids her eyes. The slur of traffic immediately dulls and Eileen wonders what happened, feels she has been eclipsed by weather. Suddenly there are no more cars and people, no colour at all. She has disappeared. Did anyone notice? Eileen has disappeared.

When she opens her eyes, the sky has darkened and nothing can be seen but Eileen's white cape, and emerging from it, her long fingers clasped together for warmth. She blinks. So very dark, yet now a yellowish light flickers, a candle flame, and another, and another. A head emerges below her, hair a silver rope down her back, eyes lowered, and a veined brown hand lights candle after candle. 'Blessed are thee among women.'

The woman's body does not exist, is merely a shadow, unless she is wearing black, all black in the blackness. The heavy wooden cross at her thin neck suggests shoulders, a torso.

The woman falls – to her invisible knees Eileen supposes – and clutches her hands together. Her face lifts, eyes travel. Up. Up over Eileen's white thighs, her white breasts, her face emerging from the white hood.

The woman shrieks. She jerks her head around as if searching for someone else to share her vision, to confirm it.

'No, it's here, she's really here! A miracle! Mother Mary!' But there is no one to witness Sophie's revelation.

'I'm not worthy,' the woman gasps. Her fingers have found the hem of Eileen's white cape. They grope. They bring the material to her crumpled lips, kiss, kiss again and again.

'Mother,' Eileen interjects.

Below Eileen the dark eyes ignite, flicker wildly over Eileen's features. The face stretches open in terror, then amazement, shudders in and out of a frantic range of emotions. Her hands pull from the hemline, convulse, and the wooden cross bobs frantically.

Eileen hopes this is not the onset of a heart attack. She does not want to witness her Mother's death, much less be the cause of it. She wants

nothing at all to do with the crazy woman who was raised by the nuns in their school, ruined by the nuns. The woman who ruined her. She crouches down, dips her fingers into shadow and touches the quivering bones of her mother's shoulder. 'Calm down.'

'Yes,' Mother gasps. 'Calm down.'

Eileen watches her mother, so tiny below her, eyes a torch fuelled with hope, and also fear – always present when Mother looks at Eileen. This fear in Mother's eyes spills out, splashes her daughter even now, as she stands over the woman, out of another time, invulnerable. She should be invulnerable, yet Mother's fear seeps through Eileen's white cape, soils her skin. This small, mad woman.

'Lord have mercy,' the old woman whispers.

How *can* she be here at the altar of the Virgin Mary, with Mother kneeling before her. How is it possible? The woman is convinced she is witnessing a miracle.

At dinner time she will clutch her hands together, eyes wild, and babble of her vision to the sisters, the priest. And Mother, frantic mother, will not be believed.

'For God's sake Mother, it's me, Eileen!'

The woman straightens, peels her lips from Eileen's hem, and looks up to her. Eileen shivers.

Who would have thought after all these years that she would still be incensed by Mother, afraid of Mother, that she would still sting with the memory of words the woman had flung at Eileen in the middle of some cold night so long ago.

'Unholy,' she had screamed, pointing at her daughter, who was terrified by waking up standing next to the woodstove, not knowing how she got there, why her feet were cut from shards of the crockery soup pot, her legs scalded, who did not know why Mother pointed at her, why she uttered those words Eileen has tried a lifetime to forget, the words she can't forget, 'Possessed, possessed!'

'Nightmares, Sophie. Just nightmares,' Pop had insisted, patting Mother's shoulder. But she shook him off. No, she would not believe him. 'Evil!' she cried, still pointing at Eileen. 'God help us,' her eyes blazing. 'Cast out the demons with a word,' she hissed.

Eileen remembers. Eileen can neither forget nor forgive.

Mother believed it. For most of Eileen's life, Mother believed that her daughter was possessed by the devil, by demons, by an unclean spirit; she named them all; and for oh, such a long time, Eileen will not admit how long, she believed it too. Part of her believed it, though it was not logical, not reasonable. Forever she had believed it, though for a time when her children were babies, when she was a young wife who pictured her future as a tree-lined street, sunny and well travelled, this belief was reduced to a small doubt that nibbled behind her eyes only when she was tired or

when the children cried in the night, or her husband stalked out of the house announcing, 'It's closing in on me. I need more space!'

'Forgive me, Eileen,' Mother grunts, her eyes bright as beer bottle glass. 'Please, please forgive me!'

Behind Mother the sky bleaches. Snow falls into her grey hair, flickers over her face. She grips Eileen's hem tighter, feels it dissipate in her fingers. 'No! Don't go!' she beseeches her daughter turning to mist. 'I have sinned.'

'You sure as hell have,' Eileen tells her, melting into a different landscape.

She inhales icy air, welcomes the chill in her lungs. She wonders what time it is, and if she's late for work. Just how long did she leave for? How long was she with Mother? Who begged her forgiveness. Who needs her forgiveness.

Eileen looks around her. She is alone on the street in Calgary with the snow, the present, and the traffic. And Mother's final plea.

Poor Mother.