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Abstract

E\ en- time the two of them go for a ride in the car. there is an argument. "I don't want it on. It's too tight." "It's got to be tight to keep you safe." She pulls against the strap. "Look I'll hold it." she says, gripping the silver tab. "You mustn't hold it. We could have an accident. A policeman might stop us." "No-one's going to see me." and she continues to strain against the belt. "Mum, if you want a ride in this car. you've got to wear a seat belt." The old woman allows the belt to be pulled across her and clicked into the socket. "It's not normal." she complains.

Zeny Giles

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‘Why do you have to make a fuss about such a little thing?’ But her mother isn’t listening. She is looking at the gardens as they drive along the street. ‘Oh,’ she says sighing, ‘they’re so beautiful. Look at those big ones.’

‘They’ve got their spring leaves Mum. And aren’t the flowers lovely?’

‘It’s all lovely. And the sun’s warm. It was cold in your house. Look at all those,’ she points out at the main road as they wait to make a right hand turn. ‘Oh I love them.’

‘The cars — you mean the cars?’

‘Look at that one,’ and she laughs as a truck trundles past.

‘We might see some trains at the Station. Remember when you used to catch the train to come up to us?’

‘What’s a train?’

The daughter begins to search for a way of explaining but her mind is tired. ‘When we pass the station at Broadmeadow, I’ll show you.’ She realises immediately she’s said the wrong thing. The sight of the trains will start her mother off again. ‘I’ve got to go home,’ she’ll say. ‘I’ve been here all these weeks. I’ve got cleaning to do and I have to see the letters.’ Then the daughter will have to try to explain that the doctor doesn’t want her to go home. And her mother will take no notice. She will insist she has to go back. The daughter has become so agitated, she’s forgotten to change route. They are driving on the overhead bridge near Broadmeadow Station. She holds her breath, waiting for her mother to speak.

But nothing is said as they pass the trains. After a few minutes the old woman points to the road in front of her. ‘Come on, we can move.’

‘Not till the arrow turns green, Mum. You tell me when it changes.’

After they make their turn, they get every green light along King Street and her mother remains quiet, lulled by the motion.

The daughter drives down to the Baths and parks with the nose of the car facing the circular wading pool at the end of the beach. 'It's sunny here, Mum, and you can watch the children playing on the sand.'

Her mother has already undone the seat belt 'Go on, she says, 'you have your swim and I'll do my work.' She takes her crochet out of her bag.

The daughter closes the car door behind her and feels a cold wind from the south. She doesn't want to swim and she wouldn't have thought of it except that it provides an outing for her mother and some physical activity for herself. She walks through the entrance gate and looks at the two big pools of the Ocean Baths. The place is in shadow and the grey cement is uninviting. Only one man is swimming. The wind is even stronger now. It catches in the black plastic swirled around the northern end of the dressing sheds where workmen are doing repairs. Such an exposed place with the battering of sea and wind.

She takes off her track suit and scuffs, puts on her cap and walks to the edge of the smaller pool. The water is grey and crinkled by the wind. She walks down the rough cement of the ramp and into the water. She feels the shock of the wetness up to her waist, then she begins to tip-toe so that the water creeps slowly up her body. 'You're mad — quite mad,' she says to herself. 'Is this anything but torture?' Then suddenly, almost surprising herself, she starts to swim, her arms fanning out into the water. The cold moves from her breasts and along her upper arms until both sides of her neck are aching. Her head stays warm. She has learnt the value of wearing a cap.

She does not swim well. She never did get the breathing right even when she was younger. Now she avoids overarm and moves with a slow breaststroke, trying to keep her breathing regular but finds as she becomes tired that she gulps water, spoiling the rhythm. No enjoyment for her in the swimming but at least a singleness of purpose. She will swim six lengths before she allows herself to get out, run to the sheds and comfort herself with a hot shower.

Every day she's been coming since her mother has been with her but she still has to goad herself with rewards. After two lengths, she turns onto her back and kicks. She likes to look up to the moving clouds and feel her breathing return to normal, then she turns over and begins to breaststroke again. Lately she has discovered that if she is alone in the pool, not worrying what others will think, she will lie on her back and let the water carry her where it will. No effort on her part, no anxiety; a precious moment of abandonment. She is swimming again — slow awkward scoops with her arms and legs. Perhaps she should take lessons — get advice about the breathing. She keeps on now in her shambly way, up and down, from one big black 5 to the other until she's completed the necessary lengths.

Suddenly overhead and so big she can feel the pressure of its weight, flies a pelican. She is startled by the span of its wings and its long bill. She lies on her back and watches as it comes to land on one of the wooden light-poles at the edge of the adjoining pool.

So fanciful this bird — like a child's toy. She smiles at the exaggerated plumpness of its chest and a beak that might have been made of plastic. Strange that the pelican should have been considered a symbol of sacrifice. Legend said the mother was prepared to feed her young from her own flesh rather than see her chicks go hungry.

The pelican stands with his neck stretched tall, surveying the pool and the wide sweep of the sea. A flock of gulls flies near him. He tilts his bill and makes a grotesque clacking to frighten them. The gulls scatter. The pelican moves his feet from side to side in an impatient waddle, ready for the next contender. No sacrifice for this pelican. Aggressive, loud, intolerant; at home with his larrikin self.

She has finished her swimming but for the sake of the pelican and her joy in seeing him, she decides to do one more length on her back and a final one of breaststroke.

She looks at the yellow-green lichen growing on the cement, the big numbers at either end of the pool, the vulgar painted steps that serve as seats on the northern side. She has grown to like the grand ugliness of this place.

Her body is warm after the swimming. She goes to the dressing sheds but decides against a hot shower. She rubs herself with the towel, dresses, and thinks about taking a closer look at the pelican. No, she has a better idea. She will bring her mother to see the bird.

'It's cold here,' the old woman complains. 'You should have left me sitting.'
'Look Mum, see the bird at the top of the pole?'

The pelican tips his head and looks down.

The old woman will not focus on the bird. She looks around her. She walks back to the picnic tables. She looks down at the pools on the landing beneath. 'I came here with the children,' she says. 'We came every day to the water.'

'You're thinking of somewhere in Sydney, Mum. Some other baths near the ocean.'

'We walked here,' says the old woman. 'And I would carry the baby.'

'No Mum,' the daughter explains. 'We didn't ever come to the Baths when our children were babies.'

The old woman grows angry. 'I came here every day, I tell you.'

They are back in the car now and the old woman does not protest about the seat belt. 'All night on the ship and we came in the morning.'

'By train, Mum. You would have come by train.' She has said the censored word without realising it.

'Home in the train. We came in the ship.'

The daughter does not contradict but that night after her mother has gone to bed, she tells her husband. 'Mum was so mixed up, she told me she came to Newcastle in a ship.'

'That's not so far-fetched,' he says to her. 'The coastal steamer used to be the most convenient way of coming here. Don't you remember they were talking about restoring the trip to attract tourists?'

First thing the next morning, she goes alone to the Baths. She looks on the wall of the caretakers residence but finds nothing. She goes out again and examines the newly painted façade. Suddenly, there before her, not one but two plaques, the first giving the names of the aldermen, the other giving the date of the opening. 1922. Her mother and her family came to Sydney from their Greek island in 1924, so it is possible. But why in the thirty years her mother has been visiting them in Newcastle hasn't she said something before?

The next day, she cajoles her mother to walk with her into the Baths. They go past the women's sheds, past the blackboard that gives the water temperature, down the semi-circular steps that lead to the pool level. 'Did you swim here, Mum, when you came with the children?'

'No, no,' her mother says. '*You* swim. I sit in the car and do my crochet. Now take me back, I'm cold.'

'But Mum, you told me about the Baths — how you used to carry the baby. Remember how you told me?' Her mother looks at her blankly. When she is sitting again in the car, she takes out her wool and starts to crochet.

Up and down as she swims her lengths, the daughter is thinking of her mother and the years between her arrival in Sydney and her marriage in 1936. She knows roughly where the family lived but there are no photos of her mother as a small girl. She remembers some talk of her mother being allowed to swim with her older brother in the harbour at Castellorizo. But as she grew older, there would surely have been restrictions as there would have been with all Greek girls nearing puberty.

All day she continues her questions, but her mother will say nothing. In desperation, the daughter rings her mother's remaining brother. 'Theo Andreas did you know that Mum visited Newcastle when she was a girl?'

'Can you imagine your Buppoo allowing her to go away from the family?'

'I know he was strict.'

'Strict!' He didn't want any of us to be independent and when I married your Aunt, Joyce, he wouldn't see me for almost a year. Oh you kids don't know what strict is.'

'But she seemed so sure, Theo Andreas. Can you think of any of our relatives who lived in Newcastle?'

'Look,' he says, impatiently. 'They all stayed in Sydney, the inner-city places, Woolloomooloo, Annandale, Darlinghurst — and we lived on top of shops —

grotty little places and people insulted us, called us *Dagos*, because we looked different.'

He is on his hobby horse and she doesn't want to listen. 'I have to go now, Theo. I'll ring again tomorrow.'

But he is the one who rings back. 'I've thought of who it might have been.' He is excited now by his revelation. 'Your mother's *Nona*, Sotiria. They were in Newcastle a few years before they came back to Sydney. That was one family your Buppoo might have made an exception for.'

It makes sense. She remembers how lovingly her mother spoke of her godmother, Sotiria. There were jokes in the family about the meaning of their surname, Carpouzi, and she smiles at the thought of her mother spending a week in Newcastle with Mr. and Mrs. Watermelon and their family.

When her uncle rings again, she is surprised. 'There was someone else,' he tells her. 'One of our closest neighbours in Castellorizo who came about the same time as we did to Sydney, then moved to Newcastle. Well, Dhespina had a bad time giving birth and she'd come down to Sydney to see a specialist. She and the baby stayed with us. Perhaps your mother went back with Dhespina to Newcastle for a while.'

She considers what he has said. Her mother would have been ten in 1926, eleven in 1927. Perhaps Dhespina had felt sorry for the young girl having to help in the shop. But wouldn't she have been taking her back to another shop in Newcastle?

Now as she does her laps at the Baths, she thinks of her mother as a ten year old and tries to work out the more likely of the two suggestions. She cannot decide but she is sure of one thing. Her mother loved the ocean. On family outings to the beach, she remembers watching with wonder her mother's plump and stiffly-held body suddenly tumble and frolic and float and swim, agile as a child again in the sea's translucent alchemy.