

ONE , TWO

Gods



ROMANCE BETWEEN THE AVERAGE COUPLE dies two years, six months and twenty-five days into marriage.

This regrettable statistic is based on a 2009 survey into the hearts of three thousand English couples.

Romance was alive and well one night in 1959 in Sydney, Australia, when my father's penis first slipped inside my mother. In the back seat of his blue Humber my mother was losing her bra, her girdle, her girlish breath and it was not yet clear what she was gaining.

Romance between this average couple died on a bright winter's morning some eight months, two days and ten hours into their marriage, when my mother caught my father kissing the prettiest of his secretaries while simultaneously attempting to unhook her underwire bra. My mother had thought to surprise my father with an unannounced visit to his office but it was she who got the surprise.

She was eight months pregnant, no good at forgiveness, and she was trapped. Trapped in a marriage, trapped in her body, trapped, trapped, trapped.

My father, David, was fatal to women. Technically he should not have been handsome, in that he possessed somewhat large crooked teeth and a lopsided smile, yet somehow his hooded grey eyes and his slow easy grace made you think he was good-looking. He was tall and big-shouldered, with a kind of drawling sensuality about his person which more properly belonged to the bedroom. He had very sensual lips.

My father was what is called a seductive father.

My father was a suburban sex god.

T H R E E

Incarnation



HERE IS THE WARMTH, NO, the heat, the pulse of blood. Here is the collision—of circumstances, of DNA, of myriad impossible, unutterable hopes.

Everything is coming together: the past, the future, memory, forgetting. A circumstantial joining, a burst, a throb.

Created.

Soon the glistening chambers of the heart, the ductless glands, the nuchal membrane, as transparent as vapour. The coiled ear getting ready to hear, the pearly eye to see.

Soon the first sound: the beats of my mother's heart.

All the world's wonders, arriving!

Some time later, I am born.

I feel the embrace of arms, of hands, of soft materials against my skin. For the first time I feel the roll of the nipple against my tongue. Sweet milk floods my mouth, a trace of salt. My eyes are

closed and there is the smell of the first woman, my mother, a musky animal smell that comes from under my mother's arms, from her breath, from between her legs. My first love.

Can a body, confined to the modest compass of an ordinary skin, tell you everything? In the fifty years between my birth and now I have experienced no wars or plagues. I was born into the western world in a rare, safe moment of history. I stand here unembroidered by historical grandeur or incident.

I am an ordinary citizen of the sated world and nothing exceptional has ever happened to me, save the commonplace and extraordinary fact that, like you, I was born, I was born, I was born.

In the last few years I have felt myself to be increasingly laden with memories, as if the past is more weighted, more densely textured, than the present.

On certain days I feel as if I might walk straight from the present into the past, so near does it feel to me. I remember the smell of rooms, and the way my legs looked on a summer morning long ago when Nina Payne and I lay on our backs and put our legs up against the wall of our house. I remember the feel of the hot wall against my heels and noticing for the first time that my legs were hairy. There was the rattle and hiss of cicadas in the trees above us and the sickly smell of frangipani mixed with fragrant clouds of jasmine. The jasmine ran up the wall, spilling above our legs in white frothy profusion.

The topography of this long-ago moment is readily available to me, the exact shape of it, the colour and taste: it is the present moment which is dissolving.

In the months leading up to my fiftieth birthday I observed the first tentative signs of life's waning. The blood which had flowed from me month after month for almost forty years began to flow fitfully. At the same time the face I had worn all my adult life began to change into the face of someone else. I was forced to understand that there was a direct link between the body's hormonal succulence and the succulence of youth.

I was drying up.

My body was in the thrilling first flush of its death throes.

I have witnessed my grandmother's waning, and my mother's, both reduced to pure body in the end. In their last years and months each became a body without a mind to comprehend it, fleshy vessels for ingesting and excreting, since everything their once-teeming brains knew had vanished. They lived without cognitive maps, living on in their bodies without memories. As I watched the departure of my mother, I began to consider exactly what is essential in a human being. It seemed to me that once a person forgets the music she has heard, the places she has seen and the faces she has known, she becomes like a person in a photograph, resembling herself but locked in a moment that has passed. And once a person loses the memory of desire, the ability to understand the difference between

want and its absence, between happiness and unhappiness, the most fundamental apprehension of existence is lost.

I understood then that a person estranged from the body's meaning has slipped the bonds of herself. Disembodied from the memory of touch and want, from the remembered breaths of lovers and children and friends, a self is vanished. If it is true that we are more than our bodies, it is also true that without an apprehension of our bodies we disappear. Who was that person shuffling along a nursing-home corridor to the table and then back to the bed? It was my mother's body, but was it my mother?

Half a century has passed since I entered the world through that now-perished body.

A human lifespan is less than a thousand months long.

I find myself gripped by an urge to tidy up, to sort through my body's memories, a curator arranging artefacts in a museum. I have lived my way into a time in which my body has its own archaeology.

I am in a fever to outrun myself, to be first to reach the ribbon, before my body forgets what it means to run.

I look behind me and remember a prickle upon the skin, a swoop of pain, the rush of blood to the face when I saw a man with whom I was newly in love. I remember the way my stomach lurched whenever I saw him, as if I were travelling too fast in a car over an unexpected hill. My heart has a memory.

I recall the sensation of love in the rhythm my grandmother, Nana Elsie, tapped out upon my back when she was cradling me, long after I was a child, when I was a big, ungainly adolescent girl with hormonal pimples. Her love singled me out, filled me with a swelling feeling of joy, as if inoculating me against the grief and pain to come.

I remember a peach I once ate in a garden in France, sitting next to my new husband. The sweetness of the peach seemed to match the sweetness at the heart of the world. At that moment I believed I would never again feel contingent, or estranged from sweetness.

I remember the hot swell of newborn flesh against my breast as I suckled my son, and how there was nothing but repletion in his fresh eyes.

And who but me will remember these things? Who but me experienced them with her ten fingers and ten toes, with her plain body with its particular scars, the story of a life made manifest?

So, as I begin my sure withering, I pluck the humble stories from my body, knowing that as I do I am not eminent or lofty or exceptional. I am but one of many, one of the hundreds, thousands, millions of bodies that have passed this way. I am one of the shabby crowd, nameless, singular.

Here's another thing: one day not long before she lost possession of her body, Nana Elsie told me that she could no longer find her

lips. 'Someone's taken them,' she said, running manic fingers across her face.

I took her fingers and placed them on her lips. 'Look,' I said. 'Here they are.'

She ran her fingers across her lips, thin, feathered at the edges, lipstick-free (she, who always wore lipstick!). 'These aren't the ones,' she said.

I want to record the lips, the fingers, the belly, the tongue, before I forget they are mine.