

IDYLL
by
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I wake up thinking my life doesn't matter to anybody. I touch my belly, as I do every morning, to feel the thing growing inside it. Then I examine my breasts, sore and swollen.

In the kitchen my mother is washing last night's dishes. She's always got a look of disgust in her face, as if she hates doing everything she does. Except she keeps doing the same things every day. I stand behind her, looking at her curly hair, wanting to ask her if I too disgust her a little. She turns off the tap and looks down into the sink - my mother never looks at the person she's speaking to. "You should go out and find yourself a job, instead of moping around the house all day!" My mother's always saying she's a practical woman and life means nothing unless you work hard to earn your daily bread. Sometimes when she's uptight she cleans the whole house in a kind of frenzy - tears down curtains, washes windows and empties cupboards - until she's too tired even to eat her daily bread. She hands me a slice of toast with jam on it.

I sit down to eat on my sister's bed. Louise is asleep. We really look like each other - the same pale complexion, longish nose and high cheek bones; except she has large eyes whereas mine are small and close together. My mother says my eyes are what gives my stupidity away. But I know I'm intelligent because I observe people and see things she never notices. When my sister's awake all the resemblance between us disappears because she talks and acts like a grown-up woman. She keeps one hand resting on the blanket, clasping something invisible, and the other on her still chest. She looks dead. I hold my hand up close to her nose and feel her soft, warm breath.

She opens her eyes and says "what do you want?" I sit there, blankly staring at her. Even though I know Louise is not a very kind person her abrupt behaviour with me leaves me bewildered every time. I once saw a film about a man who was convicted of a crime without even knowing what the crime was - and that's exactly how Louise makes me feel. "I worked last night, you know," she continues "unlike you who sat around in front of the television." Louise works in a ritzy bar in town. She's rich and has a lot of lovely clothes which she never lets me wear. She always says she should have been born in a different family as she is finer and better looking than we are. Sometimes she gets all dressed up and takes me with her into the city - but she always makes me walk ahead so that people won't know we are together. She looks at my body suspiciously then throws the blankets over her face and I hear a smothered "piss off!"

I lock myself inside the living-room to watch television. My favourite cartoon is on today - the one about the woman thief who makes all the policemen fall in love with her so that she can get away with the money and jewels. I imagine myself as the woman thief and the boys that hang out at the park as the policemen. In the fantasy I'm beautiful - I have long blond hair and I'm wearing Louise's black dress with the low neckline. I don't

like those boys because they laugh and shout nasty things when I walk past. But when I am the woman thief they stand back and gape with surprise and admiration. Then, when they come and apologise for their meanness, I just laugh in their faces and drive off in a fast car.

When I enter the kitchen my mother and Louise stop talking and turn to look at me. "See what I mean?" says Louise. My mother stares at my belly, then at my face. I sit down to eat but Louise grabs the fork out of my hand. "Hadn't you better tell us something?" she shouts angrily. My mother puts her fork down and says "not like that, for God's sake!" but Louise is already shaking me by the shoulders and shouting "come on, tell us! tell us, you sneaky little bitch!" My mother bounces up out of her chair and tries to grab Louise's arm "now you stop that, stop it!"

I duck under my mother's arm and rush for the door.

I run and run down the street, all the way to the park and hide inside the little rock alcove behind the bushes, where I came with mister Cobham. He used to come to our street with his noisy van full of washing detergents and powders; but he hasn't been back for a while, now. It was a Saturday evening, I remember, because Louise always leaves early on Saturdays.

He stood at the door, smiling behind those thick glasses which made his eyes look too big for his head.

"My mother's gone to hospital" I said.

He stood on his toes to look inside the house. "Your sister home?"

"No, she's gone to work." I knew mister Cobham liked Louise because he always slowed the van down when she walked past and stared at her backside.

"It's a shame to sit at home on such a lovely evening. Why don't you come for a drive in the van?"

"My mother says I can't go out when it's dark."

"But you'll be with me, I'll look after you!"

I liked mister Cobham. Unlike other adults he always had time for a chat, and he was always kind to me.

"All right, but can we go to the park and play on the swing?"

"Sure we can. We can do anything you like."

I rushed to get the keys and brush my hair. Louise always brushes her hair before going out, and fixes her make-up; even when she's only going to the shops to buy cigarettes. Mister Cobham let me sit in the front with him.

"Do you have a boyfriend, then?"

"No."

"What, a pretty girl like you?"

"The boys at the park don't think I'm pretty. They call me names and laugh at the way I talk."

"Ah, what do those boys know. I think you're beautiful."

I felt like the woman thief in a police car, and smiled at mister Cobham the way she smiled.

The park was lovely at night. Empty and quiet. I sat on a swing and mister Cobham pushed me, higher and higher, until my head was spinning. He stopped the swing and took my hand. "Do you want to go home?" his voice was different, softer,

and he didn't look like mister Cobham in the dark. I imagined my mother shouting at me for being out late. "No, I want to show you my secret hiding place."

We sat in the small alcove; there was just enough room for our two bodies. Mister Cobham tried to pull his hand away but I held on to it tight. "Are you married, mister Cobham?" He was quiet for a while, then he said "no". In the dark I could only distinguish the silver streaks in his hair and his shiny glasses. I could imagine mister Cobham sitting at home, eating dinner alone and going to bed with silence all around him.

I once saw a film about an old man who falls in love with a young girl. He watches her every movement throughout each day, but never speaks to her. One day, while the girl's mother is out, he crawls into her bed and lies close to her. That's what I wanted mister Cobham to do to me because I knew I was different from other girls, and I knew he was different from all the boys at the park. I guided mister Cobham's hand around the contours of my face, as I had seen the old man do to the girl - and I imagined that I was pretty, like her, and that his hand could feel my prettiness. "Do you like me, mister Cobham?" he let out a strange hushed sound and held me close to his chest.

"Come on, you silly girl, I'll take you home." But I lowered myself onto the moist earth and pulled him down on me. His body was all tensed up, pressing stiffly into mine, and he seemed to be gasping for breath. I felt happy and sad at the same time, and as if I could fall asleep any moment.

Mister Cobham stood leaning against a rock, crying. I felt like crying as well, but somehow couldn't. There was a strange buzz in my ears and my body was sore. I touched myself between the legs and felt a warm, sticky substance. "Mister Cobham, I think I'm bleeding." He handed me a white handkerchief and watched me as I cleaned myself. When I had finished he took it from my hand, crumpled it up and put it back into his pocket. He walked back to his van and drove away. I can still hear it, rattling away in the distance as I pulled on my skirt.

I like this little alcove. It's comfortable to lie in and no one knows about it. I stroke my belly and feel a pulsation coming from down there, inside me.