

THOMAS RYE

An Ordinary Lunar Sea

When I was a kid I had this recurring dream. I was lost in the darkened hallway of our home and searching for the comfort of my mother's room. I'd stop at her bedroom door. I'd open it and she wasn't there. It was my mother but it wasn't quite my mother. Her face had become rounded and white, like the moon. Luna. "See?" She'd say. "I'm your mother but I'm not your mother." She had sharp teeth and no eyes. I had this dream for years.

It was only later that I learned words like SKITZ-oh-FREE-Knee-yah. A spiky word, a harsh word, that always sounded cruel to my ears. The new word is Dee-MEANT-chee-yah. And I've written plenty of them about her. Words of love, and of glorification, for a totem that crumbles despite anything a pen could do.

It is too tempting to romanticize tragedy. It is too easy to muse on the moon from afar and see poetry. But words can make you blind. The moon only looks like a jewel when it's far away. Up close it is craters and dust.

The sun rises and my mother knocks on my door.

"Tom?" She says. "Tom, are you awake?"

I am now. I need to sleep but I need to be awake. I'm here to look after her. My younger brother warned me about this before I came to Adelaide. "You won't get to sleep in," he told me. "She'll be up and wandering around well before you are." So, I am awake.

I haven't been sleeping so well. I sit on the porch with a cigarette dangling in my fingers. Ma asks if I'd like a coffee. She brings it to me in a glass that burns my hand. I go to the kitchen and pour it into a mug. My mother doesn't remember to change her

clothes, or have a shower, but her ability to make a round of coffees lives on with electric imprecision. I usually help her make the coffee. Without help she makes them so strong that your eyeballs bleed. This morning I can't be bothered.

The heat rises above forty for the fourth day in a row. The weatherman says this hasn't happened here in sixty years. I take Ma food shopping and the air-conditioning is blessed relief from the sun. Ma pushes the trolley as I get our food for the next week. I drop a box of cat food into the trolley and she mimics me, putting in another box. When she isn't looking I put one of the boxes back on the shelf. We carry the shopping bags home in the heat. After putting the groceries away I take off my shirt and lay in the backyard to read Chuang Tzu. The dry grass prickles my skin as I burn in the summer sun. You never realize you're being burned until later.

Ma throws open the back door with deep lines creasing her face. She's clutching the papers for her funeral plan.

"These aren't mine," she says. "They don't have my name on them."

I take the papers from her and show her where her name is. I put them back by the side of her bed. Moments later she produces them again.

"You don't need to stress yourself out over this Ma. Everything is fine. You don't need to worry about this."

My voice shakes as I repeat it like a mantra. I open my book again and hear the sound of her tears.

"My babies," she sobs, "where are my babies? I've lost my babies!"

I think she means my brother and I. It takes time to decipher her crumbs of conversation. I realize she's talking about her childhood diaries. She brought them out to show me and left them on the table so they're not where they'd usually be. When I return them to her she smiles again.

I pour a cold drink of water. The water here always tastes horrible. Adelaide water. I mix it with cordial. I find her crying in her sleepout bedroom. The furnace. During the day she paces around her room incessantly. Sometimes I wonder if she deliberately looks for things to get upset over just to irritate me. I give her a hug and it feels as if she's made of fire. Her clothes are damp. I persuade her to change out of her long sleeved shirt and into something cooler.

When the doctors first told me that she needed full time care I thought they were wrong. I don't doubt them anymore, as the moon slowly eclipses her face. But she doesn't want to go to a Home. She says she's too young for that. She says Homes are for Old People. Our mother is divorced, her parents are dead, and the rest of the family has fragmented. So my brother and I have been caring for her. We've been working to find someone to move in - perhaps a retired nurse or a respite worker. Someone with more experience in dealing with these things. Until I find someone to live with her I can't leave.

I wake to a city blanketed with smoke from the bush fires on Kangaroo Island. It's not the shadowy dreams that frighten me anymore. I'm a twenty-six-year-old man now, and I'm frightened by the day.

Ma wakes in a jovial mood. We sit in the lounge room and wait for Meals On Wheels. I call it "Wheels On Meals." She laughs as I describe the young hot-rodding malcontents who come to your house, grab your lunch, and crush it beneath screeching tires before wheeling off into the horizon.

The moments of laughter are precious. I'm no longer a romantic about it all. You can't afford that luxury after a while. A child in you dies when you see that your mother has become like a child. As a kid I believed every delusion that Ma spoke to me. And sometimes even now I'm tempted to believe that she isn't really sick, that she will get better, and my old mother will return. But these moments are no sunlight through clouds of illusion, they are moments of breeze on a scorching day.

Meals on Wheels bring a hot container of food in silver foil, a cold dessert, and soup in a Styrofoam cup. The elderly couple take the meal from their basket and I hold out my hands to collect it, only for them to give an almost imperceptible shake of the head. They gesture towards the identical basket laying empty by Ma's front door. When I pick it up they give a smile of satisfaction, as if the stars are in harmony once again, and only then do they shift the meal from their basket to mine. I smile on the inside at this scene but my lips don't move.

Ma sits and says, "do you want to eat some of this?"

"No that's okay Ma," I say every day. "You eat it up. I'll make myself something in a minute."

I accept her offer of the cup soup that she never eats. It's a small gesture of love but an important one. It reminds me of the mother she was.

We have a string of visitors from various agencies and medical establishments. The bureaucracies meld into a blur. The next knock brings a woman from Pathways Respite. It's her job to arrange respite workers to give Carers a break. I've talked to Ma about arranging for her to see Donna again – a respite worker who she'd gotten along with in the past. Donna used to take Ma out for the day. They'd gone to the beach together and had long conversations about Aboriginal History. I thought it sounded like a great idea to reunite them. But as I make the arrangements Ma doesn't understand what's going on. She sits out the back shaking with fury. She says nothing when I ask her what's wrong.

I smoke a cigarette and try to calm her down. The phone rings. It's Jen from Domiciliary Care – Ma's Case Worker and the one woman in the labyrinth whose words make sense. Jen seems to understand. As we discuss "What To Do With Ma" I hear the front door crash shut. I tell Jen I'll call her back and panic when I can't find Ma on the street or the nearby side streets. I find her at Pat's house with that same grimace on her face.

"He wants to put me away in a Home," she says, not looking at me. "Everyone wants to put me away."

I find solace in the garden. As I wrench out the weeds Ma keeps talking about her thesis. She says she wants to finish her thesis. When I was a child she worked on her Masters thesis for years. She never completed it. The SKITZ-oh-FREE-Knee-yah hit before she could. Now she cradles the thing all day like a stillborn child. She reads it aloud from her lounge chair.

Yesterday I gathered all the paperwork from around the house and put it in the back room so it won't distress her. I can't hide her thesis. At night I sit with her and tell her I love her whether or not she ever finishes the thing. As I know she never will. Ma goes to the bookshelf and brings out maps of the Menindee Lakes where she gathered the data for it. I've drunk some wine, and we kneel on the lounge room carpet poring over the maps and talking of the desert lakes.

I want to ride this rainbow. I want to fire up her unregistered car and drive to Melbourne, pick up my brother Mike, and then swing north towards Menindee. We can pitch a tent and sit by the lakes while the sun sets, as a family. I want to take Mum back to her desert lakes. But I can't.

I'm woken by the sound of a nurse showering her. The nurse has a key to get in. Sometimes I doze through the visit, sometimes I don't.

I get dressed ready for Mara from the Aged Care Assessment Team. My Aunt warned me that the questioning and scrutiny of ACAT can send Ma into her foulest of moods. She gives vague, faded answers to Mara's questions. Mara observes and then scratches notes into her book. After she leaves Ma calls Mara "a fucking bitch." She thinks we're conspiring against her.

Mara leaves her assessment with me. I don't look at it. I put it away in the back room. Hidden, like the paperwork for the Homes, so she won't find them.

I catch a bus to the city to buy a present for my girlfriend. I don't have much time. As I'm walking down Rundle Mall I get a phone call. It's the lady from across the road who says Ma wandered over in tears saying she couldn't find her keys. I ask her to put Ma on the phone.

"If you don't leave the house then you won't need your keys, Ma," I say. "Just calm down and I'll be back in half an hour."

I arrive to find them sitting. The lady says Ma has been over to her place five times since I've been gone. I thank her and sit with Ma. She shows me her key ring with forlorn eyes. The house keys are missing. Fuck. She must have taken them off the key ring. It's too hot to be dealing with this. I plead with her to think where she took them off the key ring, like a fool in my desperation. She can't remember. After an hour of searching I feel demented. I'm not making sense. Ma is calm. I find the keys on top of her chest of drawers.

I pull out my laptop to write and hide from her eyes. Ma potters around in her bedroom only to emerge in fevered tears. The first few times I give her a hug, ask what's wrong, and try to console her. She says that "the woman" has been coming

into her home and rearranging her clothes. She holds up articles of new clothing that have been bought for her.

“This doesn’t belong to me,” she says.

I say that they’re all her clothes, that no-one has been in the house. I repeat this. I know that she’s just forgotten what she owns and where she’s left her clothes. I know that these are signs of her illness. Dee-MEANT-chee-yah. I know all this, and yet when she ends up in tears the fifth time I say, “look Ma, the sleepout is so damned hot it’d stress anyone out. Just sit in the lounge room where it’s cool and don’t worry about the fucking clothes.”

We go for walk. Anything to distract her. I buy a cask of wine from the bottle-shop. As we wait in line Ma walks up to the counter, opens up her purse and begins pulling out twenty-cent coins. “It’s okay Ma,” I say, and put the cask on the counter, handing the man ten bucks with my head bowed. I lift my head for a moment and catch his gaze. He’s an old Italian bloke with a rough and weathered face. He looks like he’s seen a few things. I don’t really know what he’s thinking. But his eyes seem to speak. He looks at Ma, at the cask of Coolabah on the counter, and then right at me, as if he can see through my skin.

I wait until Ma has gone to bed and then I drink.

The phone rings. It’s a bloke named Victor responding to an online ad I’d placed. He’s interested in moving in. He’s 41, doesn’t drink, doesn’t smoke, doesn’t go out much, and spends most of his time on the internet. I’d envisaged an older woman to live with Ma, but I invite him around for an interview. We sit out the back and through talking we begin to think that this could work. Ma throws opens the back door and stands there regarding us with a glare.

“This is *my* house,” she says, “and no-one can remove me from it.”

“She gets like this sometimes,” I say, my fingers tracing through ash on the table. I tell Victor I’ll make a few calls and get back to him – just like a proper real-estate agent.

“It was nice to meet you,” he says to Ma as he’s leaving. She remains in silent rage. Says nothing.

I ring my Aunty Gail. She looked after Ma for six months, before having a nervous breakdown.

“That’s it Gail,” I say. “I’ve been putting all my fucking faith in the idea of someone moving in so that Mum can stay here. But it won’t work. No-one would want to move in. They couldn’t handle it even if they did.”

I ring my friends who are at a party in Melbourne. The party is being thrown by alien beings on some distant planet. A faint spark in me is envious, as if I want to be there with them. But it is no longer my world. It is somewhere else, from a time when I was someone else, and now all I have is Here. People say to me, “*You’re Doing A Good Thing, Tom,*” but the words sound strange to me. I don’t want to be here but I can’t leave – where’s the nobility in that? The praise sounds like the words of someone admiring the colours of a bush fire from afar, throwing sparks into the heavens, while some poor bastard is trapped inside it trying to put out the flames.

“I need to go out for a few hours, Ma. Do you mind if I leave you alone for a while?”

“No, of course not. You’re a young man. You can’t be stuck inside here all the time.”

I prepare an early dinner. As the time grows near her anxiety begins to rise. I try to calm her down, explain that I’m not leaving for good, that I’ll be back tonight, and I write a note saying the same so she’ll remember it.

The cool change comes and it begins to rain.

The night at Gail’s is a sloppy mess. Ma rings my mobile. The first words I hear are, “you’re never setting foot inside this house again.” I can only guess at the vague sources of anger that trouble her mind. As soon as she says it she can’t explain what she means.

“I’m sorry Ma, I don’t know what I’ve done... I’m doing my best to try to help you, Ma, but I don’t know what to do...” My voice is wild above the rain.

I become aware of a nervous tic in the corner of my left eye matching a steady pulse with my heartbeat. I drink wine like it’s water. I’ve been watching my Aunt smoke bongs all night and I ask if I can roll a joint. I’m not doing it to have a good

time. I want to obliterate myself. Gail has no Rollie papers so I end up smoking a bong. I leave the table to kneel outside in the moonlight.

Gail tries persuading me to sit at the table. "You're getting dirt on your knees," she says and I feel heavy. So heavy. She takes long draws on a cigarette and says, "it's probably just the emotional weight of things to do with your Mum."

I turn to the side and vomit all over the concrete. I fall to my knees again. Gail tells me to come inside. I can hear her but I can't respond. I begin to cry as I feel the bile cross my lips. Poison. It burns as I vomit up my stomach lining. I wish for my girlfriend in a childlike way. I lay down to sleep on the concrete. At last I can sleep.

When I wake I rise to my feet. Ma is at home alone and I have to get back to make sure she's okay. I pour myself a drink of water before leaving. My stomach lurches and I stop in the front yard to vomit into the garden. Then I ride off towards Ma's house on the old mountain bike, wobbling and creaking on its flat front tire.

I arrive home to rustling sounds coming from Ma's bedroom. As I pause at her door I think of the dreams I had as a child, and feel as if I'm in one of them. I have that same fear, that same doubt. Will I see my mother, or a demon? Will I see the sun or the moon?

When I open the door it is neither. Ma is standing by the doorway with a blank expression on her face. There's a splashing sound and I look down to see a steady flow of urine puddling onto the floor. Her face crumples with tears.

"I never thought I'd end up like this," she says.

When you get right down in it, there's nothing romantic or noble about pain. It just hurts, that's all. I put her clothes in the washing machine and bring a towel.