

*Laura Jean McKay*

## **A sensation of whirling and loss of balance**

It was all very fine. Nothing really happened. There were layers of supreme matt around Tanya's eyes and when I called her Tanya instead of mum she looked relieved. That's the thing: when you've been away you can't tell whose history you're in when you get back. Is it yours? Is it theirs? Is it in a photograph you stared at on the shared computer until the person who had been waiting had waited long-a-fucking-'nough? I watched Tanya's mouth move. When she pursed her lips, the hairs on her face that were white with foundation bowed into the cracks.

On the plastic lace tablecloth there were cupcakes and dips, a bread hollowed out and cheese put inside and baked or something. There were no drinks except for cordial. Everyone had his or her own plastic cup and you could write your name on yours with a permanent texta. Gary was there with a cup labeled Gary. I would have said I was surprised that he and Tanya were still talking except they really weren't. His cordial had an amber tinge and when I followed Tanya from one room to the next I caught a whiff of him: whiskey warm and perilous. My cousins were there too, smiling and stooping as though the crosses around their necks both weighed and supported them. They'd visited me at least twice while I was away so I didn't feel the need to stop by them. I trailed Tanya right across the lounge-room rug until it turned back to regular carpet and then became bathroom. Tanya disappeared behind the door.

I was in the lounge room with all the rest of the guests: those cousins still smiling, another Christian couple, some more people who looked about as familiar as extras on a TV show. I needed some of that cordial that Gary was drinking by the kitchen door because I'd noticed my sister was there too, in a frame beside the television. Tanya hadn't thought to pull her down (or she *had* thought, too much. She'd probably been propping that frame up and down all morning until

those Christians or someone had told her that memories are close to godliness). I met a lot of Christians while I was away and I get where they're coming from, I do, but who can remember all the rules? Love someone and not someone else. Don't fork food off someone else's plate. Eat fish. Something something neighbor.

Loral was in the lounge room too, still with that avalanche of a face. Tanya would have told her that she's my best friend so she has to be there (Tanya told me the same thing) but Loral sure wouldn't look at me. She kept her droopy eye fixed on the cheese ball and crackers. Other than that there were just a few busy kids trying to coax something out from under the couch. Those kids had been dressed up in some sort of extreme party wear I didn't even know came in kids sizes. They were like awful dolls, quietly convincing the darkness under the couch to come out into the light. At first I pinned those kids on the Christians-that-weren't-my-cousins, but then another slimy looking kid in an amazing mustard skivvy slid up to them and the Christian dad put his arm across the boy's chest like a seat belt and he was safe. The other doll kids, loose in the world as spare change, must have belonged to the TV extras.

What I needed was Gary. I blinked desperately at the space he and his drink had left and then I smelled his cigarette smoke feeling its way through the open back door and into the lounge. I wanted one of them too so I followed the smoke but Gary wasn't on the porch, he was at the far end of the yard messing with something by the fence. A hole. I couldn't tell if he was trying to make it bigger or get it smaller. I would have gone out there and bugged him about it too but Tanya came out of the bathroom behind me and fluffed her hair and smiled. There were more layers, dark and wet as concrete, over the old ones on her face. I stuck my gaze on her like my eyeballs were arms wrapped around her leg and she was nineteen and I was only three and dressed in corduroy pants and a t-shirt I had picked myself. One with a dolphin that had been printed so the snout went under my armpit and I could trap it there. Without a snout, a dolphin looks like a pumped up blue tire. I don't know what my sister would have worn. In the picture beside

the TV she's not wearing anything, she's just a head. When I tried to imagine her body below the head I got dizzy and had to sit on the couch for a while.

Tanya hadn't planned for dinner but Gary stayed stuck to the door like sugar and sucked on that Gary cup. I thought that making something we could all eat standing up would be easiest but Tanya said, "Now that everyone's left you start talking? That's good, that's really great." And I realised I should help more. I spilled cordial on the plastic lace table cloth and Tanya seemed like she would have a nervous breakdown or another mental condition so Gary unstuck himself from the door frame and took the jug away from me. I got pretty strong while I was away, but I also got better at people. I understood that Gary and my mother were at least fucking and maybe even thinking about something serious again, so I let go my hold of the jug and tried to look Gary in the eye. I only got as far as his clean-shaven chin before I had to wipe my cordially hand on my jeans. The TV extras had gone and so had Loral and my cousins but the Christians were still in the kitchen with their slimy kid and in the lounge room the two doll children were pressed against the carpet with their faces under the couch.

"Who do you belong to?" I asked them. There was something going on in the next room between Gary, Tanya and the plastic lace that I didn't want to be a part of. The kids seemed the safer option.

"He just lives here," one of the kids said. They both had their faces under the couch and they were little—nine or eight-years-old—so I wasn't sure which of them spoke: the boy (who for all I could tell was wearing lederhosen), or the girl that someone had dressed as a human meringue. When I didn't answer, the girl pulled her face into the light and that face was a red, round, miniature version of the Christian dad in the kitchen.

"Is he yours?" she asked me.

I glanced at the boy. "Isn't he *your* brother?"

"Yes but the little dog."

I got down on my knees, which was hard on them, and that's a sad thing for a twenty-three-year-old to say. The space under the couch

was empty of everything—dust, coins, blankets or shoes—except a creature about the size of two fists. Its eyes shined out from way down against the wall. I smiled at it. I thought my teeth might shine through the dark. It didn't growl; it didn't do anything.

“Why are you dressed like a boy?”

I ducked my head out. It was the girl. “You can talk,” I said. She looked down at her froth in confusion. “That’s just the way we talk where I’ve been. We talk rough to each other and that way we’re friends. We also test each other. Like, I bet you could get that dog out if you—”

“We’re getting takeaway,” said Tanya behind us. I *was* on the ground with those two children but I didn't think she should look at me the way she did, with all the makeup slid forwards on her face and her eyes shining like the dog's.

“Is that your dog?” I asked her. I was living here now so I thought I should know.

“You want Chinese? Or there's pizza but it's not good.”

I wanted Tanya to recall that I used to live here before with her and my sister and so I knew about the takeaway options, but I was on the floor with these children. Somewhere under the couch the creature was looking at how my jeans had ridden down to show a smiling, toothless crack.

We got pizza. Tanya had the table all set up but when it came we took the plastic plates and cups and sat in front of the TV and watched *The Simpsons* in silence until the news came on and people relaxed a bit in front of a civil war and some robbery that went so badly you could laugh. I laughed. Tanya and the Christians—the mum, the dad and both the kids—stared at me. Even Gary stared. I glanced under the couch expecting to see two button eyes of the little dog staring too but it kept itself to itself.

The Christians thought it was time to take their kids home. The doll children ran out to their station wagon without a backwards glance but the slimy kid in the skivvy said such a formal goodbye to me and Tanya and Gary that I was moved to shake his hand. He had a strong, bony grip. I realised he was probably thirteen and could almost

date my sister in the picture because she was not quite fifteen there. I wanted to give him some sage advice—‘Don’t go away, kiddo,’ or better, ‘Don’t get done’—but the Christian dad was honking the car with un-Christian-like impatience. I was left alone in the door of the house. When the car had gone I realised I could just walk out into the cool night. Unless I left the state, no one cared. When you stand on a cliff’s edge it’s not vertigo that makes you fall, it’s your body just naturally wanting to fling itself off whatever high thing it can. And you have to put a stop to it.

I shut the door and went back inside. There were noises coming from Tanya’s room. With my ear pressed against the cold paint I could hear them. No sex noises but more talking than either had done at the party. Gary rumbled and Tanya laughed and then it seemed like she was crying. They’d turned off the heating but they hadn’t put away the cordial or Gary’s jacket. In the inner pocket was a hip flask of whiskey three quarters drunk, a half soft pack of cigarettes, some notes and coins, a winning lottery scratch-it for fifteen dollars, and a pill without a blister. I popped the pill then upended the whiskey into a nameless plastic cup, filled the rest with the cordial and made myself comfortable on the couch. My old room was filled with sewing stuff and boxes and didn’t have a bed. I could sleep on that couch.

I guess it had been five years and four-and-a-half months since I’d drunk anything that wasn’t home brewed in a plastic bag. Soon enough my head came unstuck and floated up around the light fixture. From there I could see tomorrow. Gary and I would clean out my room and fix a bed and maybe a desk and a lamp in there, some drawers to put my underpants and jeans. My head bumped against the light bulb and I could see into the past. I showed my sister how to go into other people’s houses but not how to leave. I smacked my forehead on the roof and could see the present. The little wooly dog crept from under the couch and stared at me like my sister in the picture on the mantel stared at me. My head floated down and made a soft landing on my neck. The dog’s eyes and my sister’s eyes were much the same. They were both very round and very small and they shone with their own brown light.

I didn't know the dog's name so I called it Comet. My sister liked flying and heaven and things.

I took my plastic cup into the kitchen and rattled around until I found an open sherry next to the soy sauce and cooking oil. Comet and my sister were still in the lounge room, staring. I took a sip of the sherry and stared back. My head loosened again, but stayed attached to my neck.

"Comet," I said. The dog didn't respond so I tried calling my sister, "Amy." My voice snagged on the y and the dog turned. I said it again. "Amy. Come on, Amy." The dog tottered out behind me.

The backyard was cold and bright with stars and a wonky moon. I lit one of Gary's cigarettes and sucked so deep my throat caught on fire. I didn't choke though. I always told my sister, you've got to be quiet, but she never got it. When the smoke came out we were beside the hole that Gary had been bothering beside the fence. It was about the size of the little dog. A pile of dirt lay at its edge. I tapped the dirt with my sneaker and some of it crumbled and disappeared. The dog made to follow it.

"Wait up, Amy." I put my smoke in my mouth and got down on my hands and knees and peered in. It wasn't a hole, it was a tunnel. The moon shone through on the other side where I knew there was a paddock thick with rabbits and crickets and cheat grass and not much else. When I sat back the dog was staring intently, its black nose snuffling through to all those things on the other side. "Go on then." I pointed at the tunnel. That dog might have been small but it had sense enough to not come out from under a couch when there were kids around, and sense enough to get into a hole when there was fun on the other side. Only after its tail had disappeared did I think about how it might not have the sense to come back.