

Villainous Depravity. The Woman was Gross, Unprincipled, Debauched and Scarlet. One Reverend gentleman passed the opinion publicly that death-by-childbirth was God's clear judgement on her Transgression of Womanly Decency. And this was, in some ways, the least of the vilification.

William Godwin retired for several years, sorrowful and confused, to the umbrageous and austere safety of his book-lined study. But from behind his door he fancied that he heard, occasionally, footfalls soft as feathers and curiously ghostly from the two strangely silent, strangely grave, and irreparably motherless daughters of dead Mary Wollstonecraft.

Knowledge

On the remote and tiny island off northern Australia where my mother and father worked as missionaries there was one area of beach I was prohibited to visit. It was, my father explained, some kind of cleansing beach, a place where the Aboriginal people, in times of intolerable distress or guilt, walked into the sea, cast off their clothes, and then, after whatever due ceremony or act of communion, re-emerged naked to the world and mysteriously renewed. I would know this special beach, my father warned, by the odd litter of clothing thrown back by the sea, and if, by chance, I ever came upon this beach, this unusual beach of littered clothes, then I must turn the other way, and walk back to the place from which I had come.

Even then I understood that it was nakedness not sacredness that caused my father's warning. He had no particular respect for Aboriginal culture; indeed he was doing his utmost to dissuade the people from their tribal ways. It was with contempt and with a peculiar contraction of the lips — which seemed to signify an almost physical sensation of disgust — that he spoke of their dances and fights, their sucking at turtles' eggs and scooping at the bellies of fish, their laborious body painting, their elaborate funerals, their night-time descriptions of their own cosmogony. The things that fascinated me he regarded as primitive and in need of conversion. He would shake his grey head and with a melancholy tone of false solicitude lament that the Aboriginal

people were insufficiently intelligent to see the wisdom of his ways. To me this opinion was inexplicable: it was only later that I realised that contempt, like hatred, actually explains everything.

This story, I suppose, is of a pair of gloves. They arrived one day at our island community along with dozens of miscellaneous items of cast-off clothes. From time to time white people in the South would send, without warning, large canvas bags which were stamped in red ink with the mysterious legend AIM. The arrival of these bags was always a pleasure and even though I was not permitted to participate in the sharing I enjoyed watching the people unpack and distribute each item of clothing according to scrupulous and cunning codes of fairness and need.

We gathered beneath the mango tree that grew behind the church, sat ourselves down in a rough circle upon the dirt, and a nominated woman — usually Mary Magdalene — would, with great solemnity and purpose, cut open each bag and reveal its gifts. Unseasonable sweaters (left behind after football matches), copious floral frocks (discarded, presumably, after slimming routines), tee shirts (washed unwisely to a state of unflattering shapelessness), trousers (from dead men), shoes (out of fashion), skirts, blouses, even suspenders: all sprung from the AIM bag, carrying with them their ghostly implications of invisible lives lived in faraway places. Mary Magdalene would dangle each item for a brief inspection, and then after laughter, exclamations, suggestions and contestation, nominate decisively the new recipient. Being a person of suave and subtle command she was rarely contradicted.

On the day of the gloves I recall that there were two other unusual items on display. The first, which was greeted by a shriek of embarrassed giggles, was an extraordinary gown which I took to be a wealthy woman's nightie or petticoat. It was pearl-coloured, diaphanous and intricately gold-threaded, and Mary Magdalene flung it over our heads to a young woman named Rebekah, who was about to be married. Rebekah, I remember, held the lovely petticoat across her hips, shyly exhilarated; and then catching by accident the gaze of her lover, buried her face in its folds, mock-virginal and pleased.

The other item of clothing, one even more fabulous and strangely dislocated, was an ancient fox fur, the type that women in magazines might wear draped at their necks. This object caused a general stir of consternation, and Mary Magdalene seemed wholly unsure of its use. She held the fur at arm's length and sent a small child to summon old-man Francis Xavier for his wisdom and advice. He arrived, examined the fur, and declaring in his own language that it was nobody's totem, flung it ostentatiously to the waiting dogs. Commotion erupted as the animals tore at the fur and above us black flying foxes shuddered in the mango leaves and shifted their shapes nervously in response to the din.

All of the clothes had apparently been displayed and distributed, the flying foxes had resettled, the dogs, disconsolate, lay resting in the dust among little fragments of now unidentifiable fox, when Mary Magdalene upended the last of the AIM bags to reveal a pair of gloves. They plopped gently at her feet, like two pathetic hands in weary supplication; they were white and embroidered and struck me as objects of the most astonishing delicacy. I had never in fact seen a pair of real gloves before, and they were so ingeniously hand-like, so redolent of another order where even fingers are clothed, where one touches fastidiously and points and caresses beneath a smooth enveloping surface, elegantly drawn on, digit by extended digit — drawn on, no doubt, to the accompaniment of whining violins and curling wreaths of blue-grey smoke — so redolent were these gloves that I longed to possess them. They were distinctively otherworldly, foreign, adorable. Wall-papered interiors opened in my mind. There were velvety surfaces, embossed upholstery and high-toned tinklings from prismatic glass. And from somewhere unseen in this private province a copper light entered, bringing peach tones to the furniture and pretty moon-shaped shines to the surfaces of paperweights and burnished vases...

I knew from experience that such impractical objects as gloves would not be valued by the community, and, as it happened, I was absolutely correct. There were a few faint murmurs of curiosity, but no one seemed to think that they were at all worth claiming.

To my surprise, however, Mary Magdalene took up the gloves and with no consultation stuffed them pre-emptively in the front of her shirt and declared the clothes distribution over. There was no sense in which this was a crudely appropriate gesture; she simply took the unwanted gloves and efficiently dismissed us.

My heart began to swell in self-conscious anger. There were inner ructions and disturbances which registered — how shall I put it? — the childish beginnings of the sin of covetousness.

I am not sure, even now, why the gloves so entranced me, but I think it may have been connected to a visit to the cinema. Once when I was seven, or perhaps six years old, I flew with my mother in the small mail plane south-west across the sea to the town of Darwin. The actual purpose of our visit was a new set of maternal dentures, but to me it centred entirely on a promised cinematic occasion.

The movie that we saw — illicitly, given my father's beliefs — was in black and white, but utterly impressive. It was like a kind of dreaming, fluid and non-participatory, effortless and ineluctable. And there, dreaming awake, in the warm embrace of darkness, I saw in gigantic projection the most brilliant of scenes and occurrences. An unknown city. Houses of impossible and imposing solidity filled to the brim with objects from storybooks. There were singing and dancing and beautiful Audrey Hepburn. There were men with heads thrown back as they smoked slim cigarettes, women in hats and gloves who peered over their sunglasses, cars without roofs and scarves in the wind, gyrations on dance floors and bristling intimacy, and one long orchestrated kiss, breathtakingly held. I sat wholly agape, stunned by what my mother later called 'civilisation'.

(And she forbade me absolutely to tell my father of the movie. Our own little secret, she whispered in my ear.)

When I saw the gloves from the AIM bag perhaps I recalled certain images from the movie several years before. More puzzlingly, though, I was simply consumed by an unpremeditated

desire, by a kind of imprecise longing, stringent as hunger. For days I could think of nothing but the gloves, and moved through the community annoyed and preoccupied. Mary Magdalene, whom I had loved, became the special object of my anger and ill-feeling, yet I did not ask her for the gloves — somehow it never occurred to me — I simply resented her possession.

At night I lay beneath my mosquito net listening to the Aboriginal songs arising through the dark from the campsite beyond our fence. Clapsticks struck and voices rose. I listened to the cycles of tribal chants telling of ancestors and rainmaking, and I thought, not as usual of the conjured images of the songs, of sweeping monsoons bending low the pandanus, of the spearing of dugong or the transformation of sisters into stars or birds; I thought instead of a white woman who, with long gloves, moved in slow motion down a curved flight of stairs and accepted a triangle shaped glass in a gesture of haughty and experienced seduction. This woman of my imagining wore a diaphanous petticoat and a fox fur at her throat, but her distinction, her supremacy, her all-time claim-to-fame, was marked most specifically by her dazzling gloves. I heard the voices through the night, mythological and familiar, and constructed, as though in some kind of strict competition, my immaculately gloved woman to contest and denounce them.

The gloves disappeared for several weeks but then reappeared conspicuously at Rebekah's wedding. Weddings were insisted upon by the mission authorities, but the people of the island treated them with a mixture of vague derision and half-hearted enthusiasm.

Mary Magdalene attended the wedding wearing my pair of white gloves. I remember thinking how ludicrous and misplaced they looked, how they were unsuited to black skin, how rather than clothing or ensheathing her arms they appeared stuck on and superfluous. My envy was huge. I sat in the middle row between my friends Rachel and Hepzibah and became gradually aware — quite unexpectedly — of something anomalous and odd

in my situation. It was not anything which I could comprehend or even identify, it was some minor revelation of disjunction or difficulty, a feeling which, in my pique, I was able to hastily attribute to Mary Magdalene's too-flagrant exhibiting of my gloves. But as I sat in the pew, suddenly everything appeared particularly concentrated and clear, so that now I remember the wedding scene in each exact, perspicuous detail.

A yellow light fell brightly through the doors of the church — for it was little more than a shed, mostly open at both sides — and lay across the earth floor, not quite reaching where my father stood. There was an altar decorated in Aboriginal designs, with X-rayed fish and patterns of cross hatching, and above it a wooden cross, robustly hewn. My father stood before the altar with the bible in his hands; he was robed and authoritative, and spoke in an unusual and extremely loud voice, as though the church were not of bark but some vaulted and echoing cathedral of marble and stone. I remember thinking for the first time: my father is annoyed; this is a voice of annoyance; this is unholy, improper.

Before my father kneeled Rebekah and Jacob Njabalerra, she in the communal wedding dress which I had seen several times before and which now barely contained her swelling stomach, he in a new-secondhand AIM shirt of cowboy checks. Both Rebekah and Jacob were bent low before my father as though receiving remonstrance. My mother, I noticed, was seated in the very front row of the church and she too was bent over. Her head was bowed and submissive and I somewhat precociously thought: this is as she always is, my mother bowed thus, hunched before my father. The nape of her neck appeared exposed and pitiable and my unclear sense of disjunction resolved around its image.

I instantaneously felt what I can only now describe as the profundity of dissent. I hated my father. I hated his voice as it married the couple. I hated the rustle of his robes and the largeness of his hands. His deliberative actions. His presence. His face. I was pleased to be sitting at a critical distance.

It was at this point that Mary Magdalene turned and smiled indulgently and waved a gloved hand at me. Sitting next to her

Joseph, her older husband, also abruptly turned, as though curious to see what had caught his wife's attention. He too gave me a wave, spontaneously complicit with Mary Magdalene's offering. Beside me Rachel and Hepzibah snickered a little, but I was caught in a moment of confused response. Anger and envy competed with shame. I felt ungenerous and mean. I raised my arm to wave back to Mary Magdalene — it seemed so proper an action, so reciprocally incumbent — and felt the burdensome gloved woman poised on the staircase inside my head begin to insubstantially waver and disperse. I smiled at Mary Magdalene and she continued to smile at me. I saw the lustrous and shining dark of her half-turned face and thought — I remember now — how beautiful her skin was, how it caught, with perfect ease, bows of glaze and illumination from even that shadowy and church enclosed air.

I did not entirely relinquish a hankering for the gloves — my cinema woman's residency was much too tenacious — but reconciled with Mary Magdalene and resumed fishing and gathering food with her. We never spoke of the gloves at all, and I believe she may have guessed that these were the particular, shameful cause of my previous bad humour. It was a subject which remained between us like an invisible canoe. We moved slightly apart, were gentle with each other and tentative in our behaviour. It was as though we balanced a weight, each aware of the poise and co-operation of the other.

Within weeks after the wedding, however, this poise was lost: Mary Magdalene was cast into a terrible despair. Her husband Joseph had been beaten with a nulla-nulla in a fight, and at his death she collapsed into a state of voluble grief, one so extreme in its expression that I dared not approach her.

The mourning cries trailed throughout the campsite. Even closed in our house I heard traces of her voice, eerie and miserable and continuously plaintive. I knew too that Mary Magdalene would be cutting her breasts with stones and tearing distractedly at her hair as she had done, several years before,

when her only daughter had died. There was of course also a chorus of other women mourners, but her single voice rose above them and attested a more immediate and individual pain. I could not bear the wailing. I thought of the ash-smearred face and the blood upon her breasts, the body doubled over at a diligent self-mutilation.

Yet it was at dinner time, I remember, when in my own copycat misery, my own version of imagining Mary Magdalene's awful condition, that I insulted finally and irreparably the paternal order of things. My father sat above his meat, stabbing and sawing, and then announced with undisguised impatience and anger:

'Why doesn't that woman shut up? Why must she go on?'

And since I knew the correct answer from Rebekah Njabalerra I could not remain silent.

'Because she fucked Peter Moorla before he killed Joseph.'
There was a dreadful, static silence. My father swallowed his mouthful. My mother hung her head, wretched at my mistake and blushing excessively. And then father arose, thumped at the table, and shouted in a voice I still continue to hear:

'You know nothing at all! Nothing! Nothing!'

He struck the side of my head with such rude intensity that my ear dramatically exploded with blood. Then he strode from the room and was absorbed almost instantly into the gathering darkness.

I did not see Mary Magdalene walk into the sea but I know that she did because I found the gloves at the clothes beach. And although I did not see her I believed I could reconstruct in every single detail exactly what happened.

In the movie in my head she approached the waves very slowly, hesitating at first as though somehow assessing their qualities. Then she would proceed, moving deeper, until the water flowed in gentle eddies and soothing circuits around her body. Her clothes would become liquid and begin to rock against her skin. Then she would submerge entirely, and after a second

or two arise, her black skin glistening and bright with rivulets of water, to stretch up her arms and remove her large, loose dress. Then, last of all, she would pull each white glove from each black hand and set them floating beside her, like phantom remnants of another body or some unimaginable life form. She would stay for a few minutes naked in the water, her cut breasts stinging with the salt water, her hair streaming out behind, and then walk back through the waves, slowly and ritualistically. In my vision it was a dark and monsoonal day, so that the sky was grey and the water deep purple. But the remarkable feature of the scene was that despite the lack of light Mary Magdalene's skin was almost blazing with silver. Her nakedness was magnificent.

I cannot exactly recall when I discovered the clothes beach. I had walked much further than usual in the direction I suspected, when I came unprepared and unforwarned upon it. There, in a little bay, feeling at once vaguely treacherous and certainly transgressive, I suddenly saw them. One glove was draped rather tremulously in the mangroves and the second lay, at a small distance, beneath it in the sand. I contemplated the gloves, so vibrantly white, so innocently tide-cast, and realised at once that I knew something with certitude. I knew that the gloves were incorporated into another realm. They were no longer recoverable, no longer desirable, no longer in fact white. The gloves on the clothes beach — formerly so invested with my movie-tone visions — were absolutely transfigured, remade Aboriginal.