

Grain of Dirt

The elderly woman feels a quiver of excitement as she stares at the photograph in her calloused hands. The black and white picture has been preserved with meticulous care, even the frame is made of solid silver and dusted with precise regularity.

Thelma George sighs deeply, one hand to her heart as she places the beloved picture back on the windowsill, where she can always look at it while washing the dishes. She stands back from the sink and smiles lovingly at the picture, as she always does, a little ritual observed all these years. Now it seems hardly believable that soon the photograph will come to life. She will be seeing him again! Dizzy with anticipation, she decides to make something nice to eat, a little treat to celebrate.

Later on with a steaming mug of black tea and a plate of two-day old scones, she sits at the kitchen table, feeling pleased with herself when slowly the smile on her face fades. Panicked now, she eases herself up from the chair, wondering if the front door is latched. But then realises that, yes it would be, after all no one but no one is more careful than her. With a relieved sigh she sits again, cursing herself for being so stupid. Why, she can remember once when the front gate was unlocked for two whole days! And what a cruel lesson that was, something she vowed never to repeat. Her eyes harden at the memory and the taste of humiliation erupts in her mouth.

It happened late one winter's evening, she had been tidying the geranium bushes and weeding the lawn and was so caught up in her task that, when the time came to lock down, she had walked away and left the front gate wide open. Later she could only conclude that it was all worry about washing that muddled her mind, she quite simply forgot about the gate. Something she has never, ever done.

That night as she lay in bed, thinking about the man in the picture, she heard a racket outside the bedroom window. At first, it was only a vague monotone of voices, until it became louder.

Irritated by her own fear, she fumbled in the dark, found her slippers, grabbed the night torch and snuck like a thief across to the windows. From deep within the shadows, childish, spite-filled laughter reached out of the darkness. And when she could gather the courage to peer out, she saw in the moonlight what they had done. Every geranium bush and rose was torn from the ground and hurled across the lawn, roots and limbs looking like gnarled skeletons in the warmth of moonlight. She heard herself shouting

HECATE

59

Susan Ehrlich, *Representing Rape: Language and Sexual Consent*, London & New York, Routledge, 2001.

¹⁵ For the ability of grammatical structures to produce 'moral flows' between people in daily life, see Alessandro Duranti, *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Western Samoan Village*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994: 4, 172-5.

¹⁶ Lesley Stern, 'The Language of Rape', *Intervention* 8 (March 1977): 5.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', in Judith Butler and Joan Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York & London, Routledge, 1992: 3-21.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations': 18.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York, Pantheon Books, 1972.

²⁰ Michel Foucault: 57-58.

²¹ Michel Foucault: 57.

²² Lois Pineau, 'Date Rape: A Feminist Analysis' in Leslie Francis (ed.) *Date Rape: Feminism, Philosophy and the Law*, University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996. This article first appeared in *Law and Philosophy* 8 (1989).

²³ Lois Pineau: 5.

²⁴ See George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan* (1821), Austin, Texas University Press, 1957: 73-75.

²⁵ Lois Pineau: 5.

²⁶ Michel Foucault: 57.

²⁷ Sharon Marcus: 401.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley, New York, Vintage: 11.

²⁹ L.A. Wood and H. Rennie, 'Formulating rape: The discursive construction of victims and villains', *Discourse and Society* 5 (1994): 130.

³⁰ Susan Ehrlich: 97.

³¹ Susan Ehrlich: 100.

³² See Lois Pineau, 'A Response to my Critics', in Leslie Francis (ed.) *Date Rape: Feminism, Philosophy and the Law*, University Park, Penn., Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996: 102-7 for a particularly striking, personal and painful account of the horror women feel at the thought of becoming rape victims.

³³ Nicola Gavey, 'I wasn't raped, but...': Revisiting definitional problems in sexual victimization', in S. Lamb (ed.), *New Versions of Victims: Feminist Struggles With the Concept*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1999: 66.

³⁴ Susan Ehrlich, *Representing Rape: Language and Sexual Consent*, New York, Routledge, 2001: 96.

³⁵ Susan Ehrlich, *Representing Rape*: 116.

³⁶ Susan Ehrlich, *Representing Rape*: 99.

³⁷ Susan Ehrlich, *Representing Rape*: 113.

³⁸ Susan Ehrlich, *Representing Rape*: 116-17.

HECATE

58

hoarsely, heart beating faster with rage but her words were lost in the thick still of night. Then much to her horror, found herself collapse to the floor with a dreadful wail. Later, she sat on the edge of the bed, reassuring herself; they are only children and they don't know any better. Despite that odd comfort, the acid tears came once more, hot with futile anger. She wept like a grieved widow, feeling the familiar poison of powerlessness. And when her emotions were spent, she felt stupid and shameful, after all they were but kids. In a wild moment, she wondered if she should send the parents a note, telling them that their children are vandalising her property.

But that is pointless because they made hateful remarks about her when she first moved onto the street. It was the mahogany colour of her skin, the slightly patrician nose, full lips and greytinged, coal black hair that gave them all enough reason to think her Indian, Malaysian, or of some other exotic extraction. They couldn't decide which but perhaps hoped she was Indian, Malaysian or whatever, anything but black Australian. Nevertheless, word soon spread about her identity.

It came from nowhere and soon other barbed comments were made: 'You never can tell with these blackies. All the bloody damn Goanna curry or what have you will be stinking up the whole damn street before you know it.'

'Mark my words, there'll be a buncha them living in that little old house before you can blink an eye. Blacks like to stay together, it's their nature. Odd, but true.'

Then they all laughed, wagging their heads in agreement and wearing expressions of apprehension and disappointment. After all she was the first black person to live on Treabold street. And so it was that her first day there was greeted with shock, horror and amusement. Knowing as she did what these people were like, she guessed they wouldn't care what their snotty brats had done to her yard. In fact, they'd probably laugh, thinking she's just a crazy old black woman with too much time on her hands.

At once, she releases the dismal thoughts with a nod of disgust, gets to her feet and makes for the laundry where the air is thick with the odours of soap powder and ammonia. The bundle of clothes piled tidily in the corner has been sitting there for the whole day. She picks up the cane hamper, rifles through the clothes, and with a grimace of distaste eyes small patches of mildew beneath the armpits of a dress. Sighing, she reaches underneath the sink cupboard, where row upon neat row of bleach,

preen, washing powder and soap are placed in variously designed packages.

She lays the frock on the top of the washing machine, arranging the material straight and begins to rub it first with soap, then adds a good spray of preen, bleach and scrubs until her hands and fingers are bleeding and raw. But pain is nothing, in fact she no longer feels the cruel bite that scrubbing takes on her hands.

These very hands that once found comfort in the birthing of new born babes and the nurturing of other people's children. The hands that were once highly prized for their clever ability to knock up a meal out of thin air, heal sickness and give love.

But too many years spent performing hard, spirit-crushing work for too many white homes have robbed her of feeling and now her hands are but numbed, worn appendages, useless for anything but labour. And that was their sole value for the white woman.

The dress in her hands has been washed and scrubbed so vigorously that it is near threadbare. But Thelma doesn't see this, her ever tired eyes can only behold the filth and grime embedded deep within each thread of cotton. At times she swears that the filth comes away in her hands, creeping up her arms, covering her in a film of scum and cloaking her with grime.

When she's finally finished, she holds the frock up to the light, scrutinising every aspect of it, as though a grain of dirt may have escaped. Satisfied now, she snatches another dress and begins the ritual once more. This goes on for half the night and when finished she unlocks the back door, peeks around it, then scurries to the line and begins to peg the clothes, humming softly. When the last pair of bloomers goes up, she steps back and looks over the clothes. They hang so straight and so perfect! She grins, not a mark on any one of them. Pleased, she goes back into the house, locks the back door secure and makes her way to the lounge room, where again she checks the door locks. Safe. Latched. Good. She goes into the kitchen, places the kettle on the stove then collapses back onto a chair. So tired. She looks across at the picture. He'll be back soon. After all these years he's coming home. How much has he changed? And will he still love her as much as he did once? Hard to say really, given that it's been near on fifteen years now. Time moves ever so fast - time is a thief. *It will eat you alive.*

The kettle on the stove begins to whistle. She moves from the chair reluctantly, her bones feeling like jelly.

After making the tea, she moves into the lounge room, grabs a chair and sits by the louvered windows. The faint whiff of the lemon

tree wafts through the louvres, mingling with the scent of old house odours.

By this time, the street is motionless, except for the occasional weary wandering of a dog looking for scraps.

Across the road a house light comes on and the weak orange glow filters through the window, followed by the sleepy cry of a hungry baby.

Lulled by the safety of night, Thelma finds herself nodding off, slipping down to where he waits. After a few dozey seconds, she jolts upright in the chair, alarmed. What's the time? She glances at the wall clock, 3:15am! There it goes again, time stealing away. Wearily, she gets to her aching legs and goes out to the clothes line. Folding the washing in an ordered bundle, she places it in the basket and makes her way indoors. She plonks the basket on the bed, sits down and looks over them carefully, grabbing each item of clothing and holding it up close to her eyes. Spotless. Good. Finally, the last dress, her favourite. A turquoise frock with a sweetheart neckline, a hem just above the knee and pearl buttons in the shape of hearts. She can remember when she first bought it, back in 93. Even when she saw it in the shop window, she knew it was a one-of-a-kind. The shop assistant stared at her like she was mad when she had asked to try it on. At first she did not grasp that look, the grimace of disgust that marred the pretty young girl's features. It took only a minute for her to understand. The girl pinned her down beneath a glacial, blue gaze and in a high sharp tone, said, 'um ... look, do try to be careful. That's a very expensive dress. And we wouldn't want to dirty it now, would we? Anyway, do you think *that* colour will suit you?' A sly smile slid across her painted red lips, her eyebrows arched.

Thelma knew. In her heart and bones, she felt the old tremor of shame and humiliation. It felt like a slow release poison, seeping into her skin whenever she saw that look, that twisted scowl of hate and fear; it made her want to scurry away, hide from that gaze.

Despite the uppity white girl, she wanted that dress right or wrong. But was not going to look a fool, not going to let the child see how much damage was done. Instead she placed the frock on the counter and walked out of the shop with as much pride as she could manage. Let the girl think that she doesn't care a damn about the bloody frock! But out on the street, with head lowered, she went on home with a sharp pain knocking in her chest. Later, she rang her neighbour, Missus Mai Lee, the elderly widow who often gave her bulbs of ginger and old-fashioned square jars full to the brim with stalks of lemon grass.

She had asked Mai in a thin voice if she would go to 'The Dress Circle' and buy the turquoise frock in the window; of course she had the money. That same day Mai returned, holding the frock in a pale pink cardboard box, decorated with a mauve ribbon and the slim gold words, 'The Dress Circle', written on the lid. When the elderly woman left, she rushed into the bathroom and carefully tried on the dress, oohing and ahhing. And when she looked in the mirror, she smiled at her reflection.

With the feel of fresh cotton whispering against her skin and the exquisite appearance of the frock, she imagined that she was transformed into another person. And for the first time ever, she actually felt beautiful, in fact desirable. A few days later she strode past the 'The Dress Circle' with a proud tilt of her head and flashing of teeth.

But now after all these years, Thelma does not see the shabbiness of the dress. The sleeves are all but worn through and threads dangle from the hem, unravelling. The neckline is so tattered that it comes away easily in the hand and the buttons have only just managed to stay on, holding the front of the dress together in a few fine strands of bleached rotting cotton.

Smiling now, Thelma places the clothes neatly in the cupboard, except for the turquoise, which she'll wear tomorrow. Bone tired, she decides to call it a day. There's much work to do tomorrow. Many things have to be fixed before he comes back home.

There's cakes and picklets to be cooked, curries and stews to be made. All his favourites. And if she's got the time, she might even knock up a damper. Yes, he always liked damper and treacle syrup. Pulling back the bedcovers, she slides beneath the crisp, cool, bleached-to-nothing sheets but does not fall to sleep just yet. She thinks about him. Oddly enough, she cannot picture his face, her mind has drawn a blank. A moment of nausea sweeps over her, stricken now she gets out of bed, goes to the kitchen, grabs the picture from the ledge, holds it close, then returns to bed. To reassure herself, she looks down at the photo with a shiver of relief – this is him.

She lays back against the pillows, photo clutched tight to her chest. And when she finds sleep, she dreams of a man with no face.

Vivienne Cleven

Copyright 2003 Vivienne Cleven

This is chapter one of a new novel.