

SUNSCREEN

*and*

LIPSTICK

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## INTRODUCTION

*‘... people will sometimes say, “Why don’t you write more politics?” And I have to explain to them that writing the lives of women is politics.’*

—Grace Paley

What an honour it is to introduce this rich and diverse collection of extracts from the work of some of Australia’s finest and best-loved writers. And what a delight to discover and rediscover stories that illuminate the lives of women in both fiction and non-fiction.

Grace Paley’s quote goes, I believe, to the core of what it means to write about women’s lives. It is politics indeed: not the mind-numbing party politics that makes us turn away in hostility or frustration, but the kind of politics that galvanises us, reaching into our hearts and minds, validating our

feelings and reflecting back to us aspects of our own lives.

These are moving stories beautifully told, cameos that offer brief and piercing insights, loving testimony, and harsh, disturbing truths. They celebrate the diversity as well as many of the commonalities of women's lives, capturing the strength, vulnerability, passion and longing that connect women beyond the boundaries of age, ethnicity, culture and difference. There is, I believe, a powerful if unspoken sense of connection among women that has the power to transcend difference. It is that connection which constantly drives women as readers to seek out stories that validate our own experience and help us to make sense of our world. We are driven by curiosity; we seek similarities and contradictions. We want to know what happened, and what it means. It is this sense of being part of a wider consciousness that helps us to discover who we are and who we might try to become.

This collection takes us on a journey that reflects the different stages of women's lives. It begins with Natasha Lester's enchanting 'Wonder Tale', which celebrates the tradition of storytelling between a mother and her daughter as a way to explain the world. A wonder tale, the mother says, is different from a fairytale, because it is about 'a clever woman who does not belong because she does not conform.' It is a fitting threshold; the start of a

thread that weaves through these stories of clever women struggling either to conform or to resist conformity.

Nowhere is this more evident than in 'My First Baby', Pat Malcolm's story of leaving home to find work as a teenager in 1949 and ending up months later, pregnant, single and battling to keep her child while still a teenager herself.

In very different circumstances the nonconforming narrator in Deborah Robertson's 'Living Arrangements' must resort to subterfuge to deal with a Social Security system that makes humiliating assumptions about the terms on which she shares a home with a man. Even in this second decade of the twenty-first century the pressure to conform, the struggle to resist it, the frustration of attempting to find ways around it and the final liberation of refusing to respond to it is still very much a part of women's lives.

A wonder tale can also surely be about love, about the aching weight of desire and longing, about the ways love can transform us, and the ways we will bend ourselves out of shape to keep it within our grasp.

It was only as I finished reading 'Joseph's Maya' that I could relax from the tension with which my own body responded to the aching hurt and confusion of Alice Nelson's narrator as, time and again, her efforts to reach out to her husband are humiliatingly brushed aside. That same tension

held me in Goldie Goldbloom's 'A Crushed Spray of Flowers', as Gin walks a tenuous line between loyalty and desire, finally giving birth to her child in the presence of her husband and Antonio, the Italian prisoner of war, who embodies everything her marriage lacks. And in re-reading my own story of the day I bought 'My First Black Dress', I remembered the painful need for a lover's approval and the thrill of winning it that I felt then, and to which I am still as vulnerable as I was at eighteen.

As I write this I see that there are, here, many wonder tales and perhaps none more wondrous than those of motherhood. They shine a light on the unseen work of women in the home, the love and responsibility that drives it, and the lengths to which women will go to provide for their children, frequently at a cost to their own lives.

*Come back, come back*, cries the immigrant daughter in Simone Lazaroo's 'Tremors' as she runs down the street of this strange new country in pursuit of her mother who is leaving home. And, in the tradition of her own culture, she wards off the Evil Demons with tokens and promises. As the mother turns back and the child follows her home we can only guess at the price of that sacrifice.

The mother of two small children in Adriana Ellis's 'Sleep' endures the visit from Carol, her single friend immaculately dressed in white silk and linen. I doubt there is a mother who will not identify with her as she becomes *suddenly*

*conscious of my stomach hanging in a roll over the waist of my skirt, a shapeless T-shirt covering it; and with the helpless exhaustion that overwhelms even the mortification of watching Carol flirt with her husband.*

Mothers are seen here too in the eyes of their sons. In Tom Hungerford's 'The Fisher Hat', and Glyn Parry's 'A Borrowed Room', we witness the turbulent emotions of two teenage boys struggling with the urge for separation and independence, and both being drawn back by their longing for the comfort and reassurance of the mothers' loving care.

The lengths to which a mother will go for her children are at the heart of 'Another Holiday for the Prince'. Bearing all the hallmarks of Elizabeth Jolley's characteristically eccentric wit and humour, this mother's desperate attempts to get her selfish and hostile adult son out of the house for a trip to the beach has heartbreaking results. And here, as in Sally Morgan's 'Wildlife', the extraordinary daily struggle of women who must be mother, father and breadwinner is abundantly clear. Hard work is at the core of both these stories—work done without complaint as women strive to provide rich and fulfilling lives for their children, in straitened circumstances.

Nowhere is the anguish of a loving mother more poignant than in 'Gnowangerup Doctors'—a written record of Kim Scott's interview with

his elder Hazel Brown. It is impossible not to feel outrage as Hazel is shunted back and forth between the doctor's surgery and the local hospital in a desperate effort to get treatment for her baby daughter. This raw and honest account reveals the indifference of the hospital staff and the arrogance and cruelty of the doctor who *had no liking for dark people* and stands by the window of his surgery while his wife lies about his presence to the mother of a dying child. If you have doubts about the fact that to write about women's lives is to write about politics these stories of motherhood should banish them.

This collection begins with a young daughter's tale of her storytelling mother, and ends with one that brings us back full circle to an adult daughter's reimagining of her own mother's story. In 'Maisie Goes to India', Joan London lovingly retraces a journey that begins as an adventure for Maisie, in her early twenties, and becomes a turning point after which nothing will be the same again.

You may already have read some of these extracts and find yourself drawn back, as I have been, to read the complete works again for the rewards of rediscovering what you loved, or what you missed. If they are new to you then you have a treat in store. These wonder tales weave the threads of women's lives into a fabric of similarity and difference. They challenge us to look more closely at our own lives and those of others, and to perceive the politics of

being a woman. I wish you the same goosebumps of recognition, the joy of validated experience and the sheer pleasure that I enjoyed in reading *Sunscreen and Lipstick*.

Liz Byrski  
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ALICE NELSON

JOSEPH'S MAYA

In Hong Kong the newspapers are full of violence. Kidnappings, disappearances, business rivalries turned ugly. Today there is a story of a woman disfigured by acid thrown at her face by the jealous mistress of her banker husband. It's not the first story of its kind I've heard here.

I stand at the window of the apartment. On the stones of the courtyard there's a stain that looks like a body. The spreading water takes the shape of arms, feet, a head. It is late, there is dust on the windowsill and a dying moth is flapping its papery wings. You can't touch moths, my mother used to tell us, there's a special dust on their wing that makes them fly. If you touch them you rub it off and they're grounded, helpless. Joseph laughed when I told him that story. 'My fanciful wife,' he said. 'Sometimes I think there's no end to your gull-

ibility.' He explained that it isn't magic dust that makes moths fly, it's the minute structures on the wings, the tiny hairs and scales designed for flight.

Joseph sits in my chair by the window of the apartment. His face is lean and tanned from the desert. He sits in silence, staring out the dusty window. If only I could walk the six paces across the room and touch him perhaps we would be safe.

There is trouble for Joseph and his mentor Aurel Stein. The Chinese want the mummy they call the Beauty of Loulan back. They are claiming that it was stolen from them and demanding an end to all unauthorised exploration in the Taklamakan. They no longer want artefacts that are part of their national heritage removed to western museums.

'Fucking hypocrites,' Joseph says. His jaw is tight with rage.

He is so angry because there has been, until now, little interest from the Chinese in excavating their own history. Only a silence in the face of antiquity. Their conception of the past is too fluid and changeable to allow them to go in for the kind of cataloguing and recording that obsesses Joseph. And in the new China, eyes are always on the future, not the dusty relics of some half-remembered past.

But this sudden interest is not historical. The Beauty of Loulan is dangerous for the Chinese. They have seen the pictures of her famous red hair and fine features splashed briefly across the pages of newspapers, heard the less publicised conjectures that this discovery could change received history about the Tarim Basin. Somewhere in their

bureaus of information is Joseph and Aurel Stein's monograph describing their theory that Europeans were first in the desert, not the Chinese.

'Why does it matter so much?'

'Bloody hell, Maya, I've been through this.' Joseph pushes his hair back angrily. 'It matters because that whole area is being brutally fought over. The Uighurs want an autonomous territory. The Chinese want the resources. So they're systematically terrorising the Uighurs. Disappearances, bodies, villages burned. If we prove that the Chinese weren't there first, their claim over the area goes out the window!' A vein is pulsing at the side of his head.

'But why is it so important to you?'

Joseph slams his fist on the table. 'For God's sake, Maya.'

He storms out of the apartment. I can hear his angry footsteps along the hall.

I've seen this rage in him before.

On our last afternoon in Perth we went to say goodbye to his father. Gideon moved a table out under the jacaranda tree and laid out a slab of cheese, bread, bottles of cold beer. Joseph took his place at the table opposite his father. He hadn't wanted to come.

It's all there. The ragged edge of the lawn, the house with all the windows open for the heat, the hazy light falling through the jacaranda leaves. None of the plates match and there's only one knife for the bread and the cheese. For as long as

I've known Gideon he's lived in his house like he was camping out in it. Chipped enamel dishes and pickle jars full of sugar, tea and coffee are lined up on a trestle table. There's one old armchair in the main room and some toolboxes lined up neatly in front of the fireplace. No pictures on the walls, just a calendar with a photograph of some snow-capped mountains that's hung on the back of a door for years. Someone's stuck drawing-pins into the corners to stop the yellowing edges from curling in. I don't know what happened to all their things, to Hannah's furniture, the embroidered sheets and table runners she brought in a steamer trunk from Melbourne.

On our last day in Australia Gideon sat on an upturned milk crate and raised his beer to his son across the table.

'To China. Hope it treats you well.' For a moment the sunlight fell directly on his face and I was struck by how old he looked. An old man. As he turned to me he bumped the flimsy table and a glass of beer tipped over and poured straight into Joseph's lap.

'Jesus Christ!' Joseph jumped to his feet, holding the dripping fabric of his trousers away from his skin. 'How am I supposed to catch a fucking plane like this?' He stalked away into the house and Gideon looked downcast. He shrugged his shoulders, palms held out in silent apology to his son. I watched him looking miserably down at his lap as Joseph came back to the table, tight-lipped and angry.

For so long I had wanted to be the string between them. The feminine force that brought them together. Over dinners, over glasses of wine, later perhaps over a baby whose small face they could pick out their shared features in.

As we left, Gideon clapped a hand awkwardly on his son's shoulder. 'Look after her,' he said as we walked towards the car.

The grief of love in that tired face, those sloping shoulders, I cannot forget.

For a long time I feel like I have been breaking myself against the wall of my husband, this almost cruel pride he takes in his own self-enclosure. In the beginning I thought of it as a challenge, something I had to break through to get to the real heart of him, to unlock the thing in him that would adore me, love me with a kind of intensity all the more ravishing for its elusiveness. And there were moments. Oh yes, there were moments.

Once he made love to me in a garden. It was in another city, in a botanical garden by a cathedral. I wore a white dress, slipped my cool hand against his neck. I could always use desire to draw him to me then. He seized my wrist and led me further into the garden, into the damp heavy cover of trees. Then he sank to his knees before me, his face hot against the gauzy material of my dress, his hands moving hungrily over my body. I remember the salty taste of his fingers then, the paleness of his skin in the moonlight coming through the trees.

Joseph has never wanted me to be beholden to him. I must always remember to impersonate the woman in those night time gardens, with her white dress and allure. I have only to be the woman who captivated him, the author, the successful academic with her quick clever face and proud reserve. The woman with her own life, her own passions, her own elusiveness.

But something in me falters and I see the unspoken exasperation in his face.

(From *The Last Sky*, a novel, 2008.)