

Conspiracies

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TR: for Mhairi Burden

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JOHN KINSELLA

Family

1.

The day she picked them up from school they knew she was there for good. They felt uneasy about it, but not angry or even annoyed. They could almost find it in themselves to be happy for their mum, who'd had a rough time of it. They were surprised though, so surprised they forgot to feel embarrassed, the emotion that came most readily to them. In most ways they were very different, but in a consciousness of their public selves they were as one. Together, you'd know them as brother and sister. In their private worlds they inhabited different planets.

2.

The trick of getting close is to share a secret. He'd write this later in life, looking back at what contributed to make them a family. He always looked at things in terms of chemical reactions, of elements and compounds, of organic and inorganic reactions. Sex, he said at a young age, is like electrolysis. He never elaborated, possibly believing the simile spoke

for itself. Their secret — his and his mother's girlfriend's — was to do with the black eye Ben Jenkins gave after school in third grade. His mother would have been straight up to the school, multiplying the humiliation. Not that he'd want his mother to be any other way, but if it could be avoided it would make a rerun of the event less likely. Mary asked him what had happened. He told her. She said, I didn't hear you right. You were playing brandy on the school oval and the tennis ball copped you in the eye? Yes, that's it. That's exactly what happened. Of course, he worked out later that she probably conveyed the truth to his mother, that they might have even laughed about it. No, he couldn't imagine his mother laughing about it, but didn't doubt it brought her and Mary even closer. His mother was a smart woman, and her kids were her only soft touch. And she respected good tactics. Mary was on a winner from beginning to end and he liked her more for this.

3.

Jo-anne lived for her music. Or more precisely, for the piano. Her father was a great pianist, at least in Perth. He must be pretty good, she thought to herself, as he's always travelling and playing in different cities. Mum says that's what drove them apart. Mum plays a little but Mary is pretty good. I'm just attracted to pianists, I guess, says Mum when Mary and I play a duet. I don't mind Mary. She doesn't yell, which is a relief, which isn't to say that she hasn't got a temper. But it's that moody kind of thing. When I'm like that Mum says I've got the sulks. I like her clothes as well — she's always neat as. Mum says she's lucky, she can wear anything and get away with it. So can Mum, but she pretends she can't. After Dad left she bought a set of bathroom scales. She yelled at me for trying them out in the mornings before school.

4.

I felt uncomfortable letting them climb into bed with us on a Sunday morning. But they'd always done it when Jake was away. And nine years isn't too old for a good cuddle with parents. We didn't invite them, they appeared at the door a couple of months after Mary had moved in and just stood there, looking at us curled up around each other, the blankets piled high. I said without thinking, Jump in or you'll catch your death, it being mid-winter. The magpies were going hammer and tongs outside the window and the sun was cutting in through the partially open curtains. It was cold but bright. The light was brilliant, the room orange with the glow of the fabric. Mary just rolled over to one side and they climbed in over me and lodged themselves between us. Sam snuggled up to Mary. They seemed to share something special. They liked each other! Jo-anne seemed comfortable with Mary, though it was like Jo-anne not to get too close. She reserved familiarity for the piano.

5.

When I arrived in Perth from Sydney I had no one. I met Sarah at a garage sale—looking for bits 'n' pieces to fill a very empty one-bedroom flat. She was just there, not looking for anything in particular. She had her kids—she had Sam and Jo-anne that is—with her. Sam was messing around with a z-grade electronics kit and looked both excited and disgusted simultaneously. It's something to achieve a look like that. I liked him instantly. Jo-anne gave the impression of being a fastidious little miss, barely deigning to be there. But there was something about the two kids that made them seem inseparable. They could have been twins, but certainly not

identical. But I'm just avoiding the issue. Their Mum—Sarah—knocked me out. A tall slender stretch of fuckability. Tall! Almost six foot. I'm tall—it's hard to find tall women. The garage was pretty crowded, the owners looking surprised that people actually wanted to haggle over their junk. She didn't notice me—she was as straight as they come. I touched her lightly without her noticing. I stumbled over her by way of introduction. I got talking, she picked up the conversation slowly. Bit by bit. Hey, I'm new in town, want to do something? A phone number. A movie, dinner, another movie. You know the way it goes. Six months later and I'm wrapped up in her arms flushed all over. Family feels good. Who would have thought it. Isn't life a bitch.

6.

I'm not in town much and probably don't belong in the family portrait. I've not been a very reliable father. I like Mary, she's got balls, you might say. I stir them both but they're both good sports. The kids are thriving and Jo-anne seems to be coming out of her shell. She'll be as good on stage as she is at home. It won't be wine bars for her—she's got a one-way ticket to the concert halls of the world. Yes, I really like Mary, and I've always loved Sarah.

TRACY RYAN

At Fifteen

You women all die at fifteen
DIDEROT

We called her the Albino Girl, but I don't know whether she really was, because true albinos are meant to have pink eyes, and you never really saw her eyes. She was always either looking away or wearing sunglasses. She came to our school halfway through that year, and that year everyone was wearing those big bulging sunglasses Jackie Onassis wore, the ones that made you look crustacean, or even insect-like.

Compound eyes. We were talking about them in biology. We had to pin insects and describe and classify them. We needed the normal specimens for this, so anything deformed or even runty got off lightly. We learned Family, Genus, Species. We learned that two creatures were of the same species if their different sexes could not only mate but produce fertile offspring from that mating. We learned to make either/or judgements, taxonomies for classifying plants. We collected nectar from eucalyptus flowers, fragile as pale eyelashes. We panned garbage from under our finger-

nails and watched it blossom monstrously in petri dishes of agar gel. When the boys heard you could eat agar gel of course they wanted to. We gave them some with fingernail grunge in it, for a joke. But it had no effect.

The boys took to her straight away. For about three weeks they all tried to go out with her. This was partly because she was a new girl, and any new girl had to be better than the old girls. But it was also because of her blonde hair. This was full, long and coarse—not especially alluring, but it was pure white, the furthest you could go. And naturally so. Not that they ever minded *fake* blonde, but somehow the naturalness of it made her more of a prize.

You couldn't really tell if she was pretty without seeing her eyes; all you really noticed was this band of red, peeling skin across her nose and upper cheeks—the only streak of colour about her. She was slim and delicate and moved about quietly, like I always imagined the Lady with the Lamp did. Only she *was* the lamp, a strange kind of lamp, a light that did not radiate but seemed somehow to implode or suck in.

Her name was Rae-Lee, but all the kids called her Raeleen; they just couldn't get it right. She was always on her own. That was because of the boys-thing. None of the girls liked her because the boys all did, and when the boys lost interest after those three weeks or so, it was too late to make friends among the girls.

Not that she ever *went with* any of the boys. She was totally aloof. But it was the fact of the boys' desire for her, however shortlived, that made the girls dislike her.

We didn't dislike her; we just weren't interested. We were too busy with coaching for "Class Struggle", a rather simple television quiz show where you could win big prizes for your school and an engraved ballpoint pen for yourself. You needed teams of three. We spent all our lunchtimes up in the

Social Studies room with a makeshift buzzer-set that the science teacher had rigged up for us, and put our general knowledge through its paces. We were not the girls who *went with* anybody. We spent our spare time in the library writing improbable novels we never finished. We were not popular either, but at least we had our means of retreat. A retreat we could ill afford, since we were girls from working families and would need to find jobs, just as much as the girls who *went with* Pablo Lazaros behind the disused music room or up on the oval after school—just as much as the girls who let Darrell James put his hand down their top, who got engagement rings, however temporary, by Year 11, and then left school.

“Why does Darrell James put his hand down their tops?” Muriel puzzled. We shrugged, indifferent. We were wolfing down salad rolls and picking the sesame seeds from our uniforms, waiting for Mr Terry to arrive.

Mr Terry was the dream teacher; all the girls giggled and blushed around him. But we knew they hadn’t a hope. We were the luckier ones, the brainy squares who got to spend all our lunchtimes with him, in training. Of course we giggled and blushed too, but never in front of him.

He had a studious-looking dark-haired wife who dropped him at school in the mornings and picked him up in the afternoons, and he was a Labor man. He said that all teachers who didn’t vote Labor were fools, they were thwarting their own class interest. He taught us history and geography and always squeezed in sensible moral lessons about hard work and self-belief. He wanted our team to win “Class Struggle” not for the sake of the prizes but for School Pride and Self-Belief. Our school had a bad name; our parents all drove Valiants and Toranas, if they drove at all, and hoped we would manage to get jobs in the supermarket. We were keen

to win, but knew we'd be up against all those private school kids who probably had extra tutoring. We had something to prove.

So we didn't feel guilty about leaving the Albino Girl to her own devices. We had serious work to do.

The Albino Girl had troubles with most of her work, even with cooking and sewing. She tried switching to Animal Husbandry and Market Gardening, but developed an allergy to some product they used on the school farm. We should have felt sorry for her but she was so, well, *characterless* that even compassion could hardly find a point of entry. She was like a blank in Scrabble, a template, an outline with no detail. She'd auditioned for "Class Struggle" training but there were only three spots to fill and she didn't get in.

We had our team pretty well figured out. None of us knew much about sport or sporting history, so Muriel was boning up on that. I was supposed to be the spelling and literature whiz. In fact the words they usually asked on "Class Struggle" weren't that hard to spell but you had to be fast at it—visualise the letters and pull them out of thin air. Nadine, our science and maths boffin, was so confident of my spelling that she always pressed the buzzer in advance, as soon as she heard the word, "Spell"—a quirk I was sure would cost us the game on the big day, since you lost ten points for every wrong answer, and she couldn't guarantee I'd know the word. But you couldn't argue with Nadine.

Nadine was the tallest girl in the school, a fact that made her freakish among the general school population, but which in her own group conferred upon her a kind of natural authority. I was part of that group, and so was Muriel. There were others who hung around its edges, but I guess we formed the core. We'd grown out of the stage of twosomes with "best friends"; we'd all known the pain of losing *her*,