

The Mowing

Ivy Ireland





That cloud looks more like a squished chicken than a dragon. Not a dragon day, then. Nothing auspicious. No signs or portents. Just an up-ended moon beside a squished chicken cloud, which is fast turning into a pile of dog turds.

I close the blind before the sun rises above the tree line. I pour a coffee but don't drink it. I wander in and out of my bedroom, but don't change out of my crushed and sweaty PJs.

I head outside and walk up the long, dusty drive to bring in the bins. This is more like it: the stew of vegetable rot, the stench of fetid flesh. A plastic bag flattened against the dirt road with god knows what in it. The sky echoing the ground.

I itch for a ciggie. No. As bad as things are, I've still got that one giant refusal to cling to.

I stare at a dead tree as my fingers twitch. Silky oak: the one I mourn, so harrowing was her slow passing. I'm helpless in the face of common ending. Borers. It's the larvae, the babies, that do all the damage. There's something in that.

I can't bear to remove the frail skeleton even though she could fall on the house in a storm and end me. Would be only fitting.

And with that, I'm back to thinking about the various apocalypses of a life. What I shouldn't have been doing but did. What I should've done but didn't. Where it all ended up, regardless. The stupidity of thinking that any of it matters.

The moon is insipid, upside down and ridiculous in the light of day. I wonder how this feeble thing could force a ripple in a puddle, let alone pull a tide. So insubstantial, it could almost be another dog-dropping cloud.

As I approach the house, bins clanging behind me, the tree skeleton points her gnarled finger at me, accusing. The whole map of events flaps through my mind in time with the bin jolts. Most of the pinpoints on the timeline involve him, of course. The Lord of Chaos himself.

I stop so suddenly the bins crash into my legs and jar my arms. I stare out at the dying, distended moon until my eyes hurt. Attempt to refocus. I close my eyes to stop them streaming but it doesn't work. I breathe in. Hold it. Stick my fingernails into my palms. How my nerve endings can feel

anything now is beyond me. But I'm beyond myself, so I guess it all lines up somewhere.

I sniff the air. The stench of new blossom somewhere distant, otherwise nothing but dust and ash. I remind myself that this day dawned. All the little errancies of life are still moving along, colliding with each other over and over again. Nothing ends, it all just transforms into something else that needs dealing with.

I shift my focus from the moon to the dead tree and back again until I can't tell if the twisted limbs are moving towards me or if I'm slowly backing away. Turns out it's neither. I find the magic spot between my thumb and finger, and press like I'm clamping it in a vice. Nothing. I keep weeping.

That wretched cloud, now nothing but a small child's scribbles, sweeps across the sky, as high and unattainable as forgiveness.

When I get back to the house, that cheeky cockatoo is at the kitchen door again, waiting for me. He stands on the doormat, cocks his head, then flies to the railing, golden crown erect, level with my head. Casual, friendly-like. I'm not fooled. He's the dominant male. If I don't get him some seed this instant, he will destroy my pot plant, claw a hole in the flyscreen or perhaps peck out my eye. But birds are hypnotic creatures. I bet when Prometheus was finally free he searched the skies for an eagle. Not out of fear, but longing.

The cockatoo demolishes the Wild Friend Harmony Mix I scramble to put out on the willow-patterned plate, and afterwards he perches on the back of my deckchair. He cocks his head to the side, fluffs out his dirty white feathers. I smell musk.

The cockatoo waits, expectant, head on that curious angle, and there's something in him, something almost tame but utterly wild and unknowable. It makes me want to be known, understood right down to the smallest quark inside me. More correctly, travelling through me, but let's not get into that. So here's what happened yesterday:

It's not even all that hot just on dawn, but when I answer the door the Lord of Chaos is posed there, leaning against the doorjamb, wearing a singlet.

'Thought I'd mow the lawn,' he says, his voice so gravelly and low it's a purr.

'Doesn't need doing,' I say. 'It's mostly dead. Besides, I'm friends with the weeds. They're survivors.'

Grunt from him. A knowing grimace.

Silence from me. Raised eyebrows. Mouth in a straight line.

'Yeah, nah, it does. Right?' he says.



I don't give him anything. I try with all my might; I really do. I know now I should have spoken three hard words to him. Not just two words, because I should have put a 'now' at the end so he didn't take it as an opportunity to remove himself later in the day sometime when it suited him to leave.

I was probably in shock. I hadn't heard a word from him in some unit of time measured solely in heartaches. Anyhow, did it matter how long he'd been gone once he'd showed up in my yard?

That's the thing about all the memories that spin through our skulls: they are altered by what happens right now. Even the best of the nostalgias will forever bear the taint of this moment right here, no matter its significance or lack thereof. The past isn't any sort of pure thing. The past is murky layers. This is physics, or maybe it is metaphysics. Strata of memory (or is it the space-time continuum or is it quantum loops) get all squished together in our minds and six years ago might as well be six seconds.

It's all nothing but what we make of it, really. Thoughts, memory, the mind. So, in any sense that is real, he and I have just left off. Again.

And we are back at it. Again.

And because I'm frozen to the spot with something like fear but could be love, he takes himself off to mow the lawn.

He rolls a durry as he walks down the drive towards the back shed. Slowly licks the paper as he looks back at me. The early sun is behind him. Rose gold. Beautiful. An anti-halo halo if ever I saw one. Seems he's decided to smoke on forever, Cerberus be damned.

Within seconds, deep sighs sound from the direction of the rusted roller door as he realises he'll have to go to the petrol station to fill the jerry can. The closest petrol station isn't close.

'Better if you keep this filled, right? Doesn't take much to put it in the boot, take it out and fill it when you top up the car.'

He throws the words at me as he stomps past.

He gets in my car – he came on his motorbike of course, the flashy city-slicker Italian one, completely useless – and flips the keys down from under the visor, like he just assumes I'm

still keeping them there. And because the fact that he knows where they are means he has every right to them.

The keys fall down onto his lap like a blessing from the righteousness of the moment; the battered Sea World Gold Coast keyring I bought for him when we were young and together and thought we could escape this place. Plastic love: it never goes away. He plucks the keys up, and in one fluid movement has them straight into the ignition. His fingers have always been too graceful and pretty for him. Magician. One swift gesture and everything I own is his again.

I'm not sure he notices that I'm not responding. He's stealing my car as I stand idly by, neutral as the off-white walls in a hospital.

I'm so wretched, I find something to do while he's gone.

After he mows the lawn, then whipper-snips down the shady side of the house, destroying my nasturtiums – the only thing remotely green left here because I painstakingly pour my shower water on them – he's a sweaty mess. It's lunchtime, and proper hot now. Actual singlet weather. But he's taken his off. Problem is, sweat doesn't look bad on him. Never did. And he's standing right there, adjacent to where I'm standing. Glowing, like, on the back stoop.

'Can I use your shower at least?' he says. Churlish, with the usual flirt thrown in because he can't help himself.

What, would he like a buffet lunch too? A thank-you card with flowers? It's not my fault he's been mowing the lawn in the heat. Lord knows I didn't ask him to turn up on my doorstep. I never do.

I always do; it's a sickness.

And he knows. He always knows.

'Alright,' I say. But I don't move to let him in the door. I just stare at him, all sorts of hurt in my eyes.

He looks back at me like a snake with a rat halfway down its neck.

He pushes past without trying to avoid brushing against me. I'm coated in his sweat now, so in retrospect I guess I could

blame the pheromones. Ants use them to build empires; why shouldn't he use them to bring one down?

I don't react to the sweat and dirt and tiny flecks of grass on my sundress. The good floral dress with the yellow roses. I changed out of the old shorts I was wearing when he arrived – men's Stubbies, they'd got oil all over them. I had a wash and put a bra on, even, but not my good one. Not the black lace.

We can have all the clever insights we care to have, but my best theory – and I will live out my days in jail if I don't end myself, so it might be my last theory – is that it doesn't matter one jot. The body wants what it wants, the body takes over. Blame chemicals or intricate cell exchanges or survival drive. The body is animal.

Yet in that moment with him I am calm and goodness. I am a meditation app. I make myself a tea: Yorkshire Gold, not enough milk because I want to make the dregs last for my dawn cuppa. The store is further away than the petrol station and the petrol station doesn't have the good milk. I don't make him a tea and, no, it's not about using up my milk because he likes it black. Two and a half sugars. Disgusting. I've often wondered if all that anger he carries is down to the sugar.

I sip my tea too hot, burn my tongue, pretend I'm not listening for the moment when the water stops.

There's a cruel orange light outside. Summer afternoons here make sure you don't know whether the headache is caused by exhaustion or photo-oxidative damage. Relentless sweltering and sweating, deeply hurtful in recesses you don't know you have. And all that smoke hanging around from those endless damned bushfires just makes the feral glow worse.

You don't need me to tell you that these latest fires have completely destroyed our lungs whether we know it or not. Not just the human lungs of those who made the whole mess, but the lungs of every blasted thing pitiful enough to own lungs or versions of lungs. From the bloody burned koalas on TV to the sad withered eucalypt in the backyard who has still not returned to herself since the drought before the fires.

Do trees have mirror neurones? I don't think this gum tree – I call her Dame River Red, though she's an ancient

hermaphrodite, self-sufficient the way we all should be, superior and proud with nothing like a gender – experiences any empathy for me. For any of us. She's been there a hundred years and more, signalling all kinds of things to all kinds of other things above and below ground with her chemical language that we are only just beginning to scratch the surface of. It's not the plant kingdom's fault we are too basic and narcissistic to comprehend any of it.

It'll be a crying shame if the fires take this tree. I don't know what I'll do with myself. Fortunately, I'll be carted away by then, one way or another.

Anyway, I'm thinking of Dame River Red, and her potential plight and the actual plight of millions of other wood kin who likely wish we would just hurry up and get the annihilation of our stupid species over and done with so they can clean up the mess of what remains (assuming there's going to be anything left when we are done with it, which is a big assumption) so I don't notice he's standing right behind me now, water dripping onto my kitchen floor. I also miss the unmistakable fact that he's only wearing a towel.

Until he drops the towel.

Afterwards, he says I still have the body of a nineteen-year-old. Well, he should know all about that.

So I ask how his latest nineteen-year-old is going, and the air is sliced open. At first. He takes a long sip of the whisky we are slowly finishing off. My whisky. Expensive. Tasmanian.

I reach for the minimally labelled bottle on the mismatched bedside table – my bedhead is beautiful, an antique, left over from the good times, while the bedside table came in a flat-pack from somewhere cheaper than Kmart – and pour myself another finger or two. Sit. Sip. This whisky is blessed by some cold and fierce god.

He remains still to match the silence. I lie back down, stare upwards, away from him, towards the ceiling where a dark spot is forming near the overworked fan. It has a unique click, that fan. Try as I might, I can never make the clicks fit into a rhythm. Might keep time for a moment or two, but it always

falls back into a disgruntled, arrhythmical noise. *Racket*, as my piano teacher used to say to me. Seemed like it was all I could play: *pure racket*. Amazing, the phrases we reach across the continuum to pluck from the layers of childhood.

And the spot on the ceiling: some sort of dry rot. It is everywhere, whether we see it or not, the great decay. Even as the two of us lazily recline, crowned in the glory of what we've been at between naps and drinks, we, too, rot slowly away. Right there in front of each other. In another moment of space-time folded back on itself, right there beside us, he and I are nothing but sticky pools of decay. In another moment, we aren't even that.

He speaks, so quietly I barely hear it.

'Left me ages ago for a fellow nineteen-year-old. Maybe he's in his twenties. Lead singer. Crap band. They'd been having an affair. She took me along to see them, one time. Torture. And that was before I knew they were sleeping together.'

He should know all about that. He, himself, no stranger to infidelity and an exceptional guitarist from a fairly famous band, back when being in a band was something.

It's sad to speak of the state of live music now, so I don't. It's sad to speak of the state of him, considering all that came before, so I don't. It's sad to even mention irony, so I don't. I don't speak at all and he takes this as an invitation to keep going, a little louder now. I try not to wince as the ire rises in his voice, but I'm wincing.

'He asked me to autograph a tattered old vinyl, can you believe it? Don't even know where he would have gotten one of our records from these days.'

He doth protest too much. His records are still utterly around. I heard one of his blasted songs in an elevator when I drove to the city a month ago. It made me get out on the wrong floor and slide down the wall of an endless corridor. A stranger in a suit offered to phone someone, gave me a tissue.

'Can you bloody believe it?' he says again. Louder again.

I can well believe it of course, though I don't say that either. Doesn't he remember what it was like to be twenty-odd and full of balls? It would mean less than nothing to the lead-singer

man-child to sleep with his idol's girlfriend. That sort of thing wouldn't even register a tiny blip on his internal ethics radar, assuming he'd developed one.

I roll away from him, making sure I'm still wrapped in the floral cotton bedsheets, concealing increasingly floppy skin. I laugh, but only silently, with my belly. The poetry of it all deserves some outward sign to mark its passage.

'Almost operatic,' I say because I have to speak eventually. There's so much music in my words, I immediately wish I hadn't spoken.

He mumbles something fierce but I don't catch it. I hold my breath to force the giggles back down but they flood out as a coughing snort.

I prop myself up on my elbow and reach for another sip of whisky to stop anything else exploding from my mouth. I pray to all the dead gods I know that I don't spray it across my good sheets. It's hard to balance the sheet and the drink, and I am momentarily stilled with the knowledge that this angry man, who cannot be my man ever again, who never was my man, whose very frustration with existence means he should not be anyone's man, will now start to shift around and then get up to leave and I'll be left here alone to think whatever words I like, speak them as loud as I like and bitterly laugh about the now horribly obvious fact that I gave myself away to the Lord of Chaos again, making myself less than nothing in the unfolding fairytale of this day.

It's utterly unforgivable. This afternoon's relief for him is a portal in the universe opening up to swallow everything once held dear for me.

I connect the synapses, constellate, aggregate the facts: the other one, the latest nineteen-year-old, has rid herself of him. A child could do what I could not. She, all legs and no clue, is far less desperate than me. Sex Pistols' 'Pretty Vacant' rings through my head. *We're so pretty, oh so pretty ...*

I put the glass down, and stare over at him, my gaze hard to read now, I'd imagine, because I'm not really looking at him after all. I'm picturing him, and myself, as dummies in a shopfront window. Naked, but all our bits smoothed over,



plastic and asexual. Staring at each other with beige eyes. No irises. Or whites. Like they've been sewn shut with that clear glue they use now instead of stitches, with all their eyelashes plucked out.

I nod to myself. Fitting image. Pitiful.

And the way the Lord of Chaos looks away from my gaze, coupled with the tone of his silence, lets me know it's no laughing matter for him either. Any of it.

As predicted, he shifts in the bed away from the late sunlight that has crept between us through the open window. Even now, it would burn the surprisingly pale skin inside his tan line.

And then I see what he's trying to hide. There's a tear there, rolling down his craggy cheek. For who or what or when I shouldn't try to guess. But I do. Options include:

One: memories of his own faded stardom, which could be effectively summarised as years of abusing everything he could get his hands on. Mostly himself.

Two: the fact that none of it was ever enough.

Three: the fact that the crotchety old man he's become in his forties couldn't even hold on to the latest impressionable girl model who had never even lived out of home before he swept her up in his charm net.

Four: the fact that there are young men out there coming up through the ranks all day, every day, ready to turn into carbon copies of him and live out his whole selfish life; that the machine keeps perpetuating itself forever and ever amen and, though he feels like the Emperor King of it all, he is horrifically typical.

Five: the fact that his entire *raison d'être* now boils down to a signed record that looks cool only in a kitsch, mocking way on the wall of a dingy uni-student den.

Six: that the heat this afternoon does not seem to be abating with the setting sun.

I might cry about that one. Anyway, it's probably none of those. One thing is for certain: his tear has absolutely nothing to do with any sort of regard for me.

He sees me seeing. He knows that I know. But he doesn't see all that I know.

'Right,' he says.

He gets up to leave and I let him.

That is the point where it ticks over into wilful and deliberate. I've had all afternoon to let him know what I did while he was mowing.

I don't know which loop of string-theory it was that led me to drain most of the oil from the Lord of Chaos's motorbike and pour two cups of sugar-water into the fuel tank while he was out getting petrol for the mower, and I never will.

I have a feeling, though, that the notion to add tiny smashed shards of nasturtium to the witches' brew came from the exploded star particles comprising my DNA. I'd wanted to destroy that bloody stupid bike: the glittering signifier.

I hadn't planned on ending the signified. ▼

This story won the Olga Masters Short Story Award in 2021.

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