

LIKE A VIRGIN

THERE is a part of your life, I now realise, in which you are so clean and fresh-looking that you can wear the oldest clothes and still look pretty. I noticed this stage passing after my son was born. I still went into second-hand shops. I was good at finding the right things, running my eyes along the rows of dresses, pulling something out with red in it, a bold pattern, a geometric neck. One day, with my son in his pram, I tried one of these dresses on, and I looked as though I had been born when the dress was made. No more a doll, a gorgeous baby doll dressed up in pretty doll's clothes. And I no longer had that strong, eager, possible look that had made it hard for me to meet my own eyes in the mirror. Now, staring

Six Bedrooms

straight back at myself, I was just a woman in a piece of clothing whose cut did not disguise my widened hips, whose stained fabric made me look stained as well.

When I was fifteen I went to a party given by one of the girls in my year, the kind of party everyone was asked to. She had a new record which we hadn't heard. It was Madonna, *Like a Virgin*. I didn't like it much. I was given to anachronistic musical passions inspired by my parents or my older brother. The Beatles, of course. An Australian recording of *The Rocky Horror Show* with Reg Livermore and Kate Fitzpatrick. David Bowie. I stopped at the doorway of Katie's sunken living room and looked down at the girls writhing on the carpet.

Of course, I didn't know what it meant: like a virgin. No – I knew what it meant, but I didn't know what it was to be reclaimed like that, to find a love so fresh that you felt like you were doing it for the first time. Doing it for the first time was something I wished could happen while I took leave of my body. I wanted a beautiful anaesthetist, a drug to make me swoon. I watched the girls dancing like Madonna, a sort of shiver from top to bottom running through their bodies like a ripple of water.

I couldn't stay there watching them. I was needed somewhere else; my friend Judy had drunk nearly half a bottle of tequila and I had to take care of her. I found

her on the bed in Katie's bedroom. I tried to get her to sit upright, to drink the water I had brought her, but she wouldn't. I stood up and tugged firmly at her arm, put one hand behind her head and tried to lift her up to sitting. But she just groaned and threw herself backwards, so hard that she cracked her head against the wooden bedhead, and the girls who had followed me into the room screamed and laughed.

I was ashamed of us. Judy was exposing us, showing everyone how unable we were to deal with being at a party; to stay on our feet, talk to the boys, dance to 'Like a Virgin'. All the privacies of our friendship were a joke here. I regretted everything: the lunchtime retreats to the library, the secret language, the matching bead bracelets. I was sweating. I was wearing one of my father's jumpers, nearly to my knees, with a belt round the waist, and stockings. It was summer. The wool gaped away from my body so that I could feel the sweat coursing down between my breasts. I wasn't wearing a bra because I hadn't been able to stop the straps from showing. I pushed the sleeves of the jumper up past my elbows and knelt down beside Judy and bellowed her name in her ear, but she turned over, away from me, so that I could see the vulnerable back of her neck and the broad rolls of her waist, where her t-shirt had ridden up.

*

Six Bedrooms

I had been with Raffaello when Katie came and got me and said Judy was vomiting. I loved him. I had started loving him properly one day at assembly when I'd been standing behind him and happened to look down at his legs. There were legs all around me. The prettiest girls' legs belonged to Vanessa Sloane, indisputably – they were long and brown and the thighs were nearly as slender as the calves, but not so slender as to give her that horseriding gap between her legs that you see in some slim women.

The boys' legs were always interesting to me. Dean Meyer's: solid flesh, with no bone or muscle showing, blotched with freckles, ginger-haired. Matt Willmott's: tanned and stringy. The boys at our school wore dark blue shorts, King Gees, perfectly flattering to a bum the right size. Raffaello's bum was not very big, and his King Gees hung a bit, but his legs, I realised that morning, were beautiful. They were brown and had dark hair, though not a great deal. He had very white socks, pushed down, and sneakers, and his bag dangled off one shoulder. I felt helpless, standing there in the sun while the vice-principal harangued us, almost as though I might fall on my knees.

But how would I persuade Raffaello to love me? Could it be done? Did my body make sense to someone like him? I was short and slight, but embarrassingly

Like a virgin

ample-bosomed. I had no pimples. My mother's friends were always leaping at me with index finger and thumb at the ready, shrieking, 'Doesn't she have beautiful skin!' But this did not seem to register; I was not being *seen*. It was different for other girls. Sarah Lamplough, for instance, who was bony, with lank hair and a face like a fist – she had a boyfriend. Paul Bosch: not a boyfriend I would have wanted, with his pudding-bowl haircut and sneering assertions about Πr^2 and the speed of sound, but still a boyfriend. Once, outside English, Raffaello's friend Andrew accused them of not really *doing* anything.

'You're afraid to pash,' he said, and they seized each other without a beat and locked together, tongues twining. Then they parted, panting, facing us triumphantly.

Judy's mother was at the opera that night, so I rang mine, and she came to get us. My mother is smaller than I am; we needed help, to get Judy to her feet and into the car.

'I'll get a couple of the boys,' she said, and disappeared, coming back with Andrew and Raffaello in front of her, her hands in the smalls of their backs. She was impatient, unsurprised. It was hard to tell whether there was something she was storing up for me. Part of the terror of being my mother's daughter was that she would not show anger in front of other people. And then she

Six Bedrooms

would close the front door behind you and turn on you, take you apart for your faithlessness, your rudeness, your stupidity.

Judy could not be made to stand, or even to open her eyes. I was sweating very heavily now. Andrew took the shoulders and head and Raffaello took the bottom and legs. A group had gathered to watch and give useless instructions. Judy sagged between the boys, her weight beyond what they had expected; Raffaello had to use his knee on the backs of her thighs to lever her up again. Katie's house had a steep driveway and my mother had parked her Saab at the top of it. I ran effortfully up the drive in my woollen jumper and stockings, and opened the car's back door. The boys staggered up after me and jammed Judy in. I had to go round the other side, open that door and try to pull her by the shoulders. I hissed, 'Come *on!*' and she moaned, turned her head and was sick into the foot space behind the driver's seat. At the same time she released a terrible, noisy fart.

I went back round. I bent her knees up and closed the other back door. I didn't check to see if she had shat herself, and I didn't speak to the boys, who were retreating down the drive, Andrew already shouting the story to the group below. I climbed into the front seat and wound the window down immediately, putting my face

Like a virgin

out into the jacaranda-scented air to stop myself from being sick too.

My mother got into the car and I said, 'I'll clean it up. I'll clean it up. Take us home.'

She wound down her window, and we pulled out into the dark, leafy street.

I was born in the 1970s. I was a late child, coming ten years after my older brother, when my parents were just taking their last steps together, just finishing themselves off as a couple. My father already had another family, although my mother didn't know about that at the time. When he left, my mother took, in a way that makes perfect sense now, to serious drinking. She weaned me, deliberately; her intake of wine from those round glass flagons (the kind with a handle you could hook two fingers into; I can still feel the pressure of it on my index and middle finger) was too high for someone breastfeeding. I learnt this from my brother, who helped her look after me, in ways I couldn't imagine. I know now that there was more to do than change nappies and give bottles. But he was a strong, adaptable being; besides, he needed someone to care for.

My mother and Judy's mother were in a women's group together. It was the women's group that saved her

Six Bedrooms

life, my mother said, collecting second-hand clothes for me, taking James to and from school, coming once a week to clean the house. And they were people to drink with. Every Wednesday at midday they met, well into my memory.

So I'd always known Judy, but until we started high school together it was in that way of someone not quite understood, not seen regularly enough for her personality to make a strong impression on me. I remembered that she was fat, because my mother talked about it, how Judy and Barbara always had trouble with their weight, and that was all. Once or twice we were both at women's group, when we were sick or there was a strike at our schools. Then we were left to play with each other, to try to work each other out. Judy's mother left out a wedge of heavy brown bread for us to make ourselves sandwiches with while the women went upstairs, their platform heels clunking on the wooden floor against the bird-like cries of laughter and clinking of bottles. Judy got some honey. They kept it in the fridge. I held my knife above my piece of bread and the honey slowly lowered itself on to the butter.

When my father left, before I was old enough to know I had a father, he did not take anything with him. I think this is because when he first said *I'm leaving*, first stepped out the door, my mother bolted it behind him, and that

was it. Locks changed, and he never set foot in the house again. I don't know that this is exactly what happened – nor does James, who was at school that day – but it is easy to imagine.

Not much survived from the time of my parents' marriage. Perhaps there had been photo albums, wedding presents, cocktail sets, but if there had my mother had thrown them out. Everything but the books; shelves and shelves of them. My father liked American humorists from the first part of the century: S. J. Perelman, Robert Benchley, James Thurber. I used to take my copy of *The Thurber Carnival* to school when I started Year 7. I showed it to Judy. We had been put in the same class, and we sat together gratefully, looking at my book under the desk. The book started to come apart within weeks – it was an orange Penguin, more than thirty years old, and it had sat on the shelf without being touched for a long time. But I stuck one of the cartoons on the front of my folder; the famous one, with the angry-looking woman on all fours on top of a bookcase, and a man saying: *That's my first wife up there, and this is the present Mrs Harris*. I had read about how the cartoon was a mistake: the woman was meant to be at the top of some stairs, but he'd got the perspective wrong. I didn't ever find out what she would have been doing at the top of the stairs, but there

Six Bedrooms

was something I liked in the way the cartoon came out of a mistake.

Judy was an only child. Her mother hadn't ever been married. I knew that. My mother had told me, not with any special emphasis. Emphasis was not needed. It's hard to describe the quality that this information gave Judy – not illegitimacy so much as unwantedness. Judy herself once said to me that her father had never bothered to find her, that he had a real family somewhere else, in another state.

I refused to consider myself the same as Judy. My father's other family was in the same city. I had a brother. My parents had been together, they had fought and fought and then divorced. The insults they still conveyed to each other through me were part of their connection. I had an older half-sister and a younger half-brother, one born between James and me, the other after my mother got my father out the door. I lived in a drama, a TV show, with my mother as the bitter, sometimes drunken leading lady, but Judy, I thought, lived in a kind of emptiness, peopled only by her eating and her mother's angry singing.

Monday was much worse for Judy than it was for me. We had English first, together, and when we walked

Like a virgin

down the concrete steps to the bottom of the school, boys from our year bumped past and made vomiting and farting noises. Sarah Lamplough was sitting on the railings outside the classroom, with Paul Bosch caught in the scissors of her skinny legs. They were whispering to each other with their foreheads together, but as we approached they looked up, Paul blew a soft raspberry, and Sarah giggled.

It went on like that through first period, second period, recess, lunch. By the end of the day the people in the years below knew too. Judy kept her head down and didn't cry. At home time I held her arm and steered her through the bus lines to the gate. I said, 'Ignore them, ignore them,' over and over.

The temptation to jump ship was very strong. But it wouldn't do; there was nowhere for me to go. Judy and I toiled up the hill with the sweat running down our legs. It was an overcast day, hot, the sort that had you checking the back of your uniform to make sure your period had not started. Judy was walking a little ahead of me. Her thighs were mottled with heat. I hated her. I wanted to hit her on that stupid big bottom, push her over, shout at her. We would never escape. We had two more years of school. We would never get to the end of this.

*