



## A Simple Text, A Complex Reckoning: On Sisters and Queers

### Description

## A Simple Text, A Complex Reckoning: On Sisters and Queers

### Author's Memo

Written in the conversational spirit of Frank O'Hara, this poem is based on text messages between me and my sister. It is a reckoning on sisters and queers after themes of family violence, sibling disconnection and queer isolation emerge. Initially flippant, the tone is consistent with the simplicity of my sister's first text message, but as emotions escalate, intensity builds to create a stream of consciousness effect.

**'Initially flippant, the tone is consistent with the simplicity of my sister's first text message, but as emotions escalate, intensity builds to create a stream of consciousness effect.'**

As autoethnography, my subjective voice situates my work in an Australian cultural context through an ironic reference to the TV soap *Neighbours*, famous for its catchy theme song that applauded middle class neighbours supporting one another, as opposed to middle class families hiding violence behind closed doors with their desperate queer kids struggling with their identity. Growing up in this cultural context is further emphasised by my reference to the Australian actor Nicole Kidman. Though I infer we are of the same ilk by fondly calling her 'our Nic,' it is only our age that is similar. She is a model of heteronormativity. My alliance with her is a symptom of the ongoing lack of mainstream queer role models, which contributes to ongoing internalised homophobia.

**'It is a reckoning on sisters and queers after themes of family violence, sibling disconnection and queer isolation emerge.**

My sister and I were divided through the fear, silence, secrecy, and shame that family violence creates. Our parent's conflict did not strengthen our bond as we each had our own ways of reacting, and as an adult, she moved overseas. As the sister who stayed close to our mother, I suffered a deep major depression after our mother's death. My mother's vulnerability led to a mutual dependency and without her I was unmoored. The time after our parents' death was also marked by increased conflict between my sister and me. It was as if we were trying to continue to assert our position as favourite child, as if we were unaware the contest had always been futile, as if our sibling rivalry was a game we could never win.

By not growing up as allies, my sister and I never developed the capacity to freely discuss my queer identity. Now, we do not tend to talk of intimate matters. Perhaps we are too burdened with misplaced shame and secrecy from family violence, or too distrustful of each other from the destructive competitiveness of our dysfunctional family dynamics.

When I refer to another Nicole Kidman movie and accuse my sister of dripping 'easy beige Stepford happiness,' I am expressing frustration that she lives an uncomplicated heteronormative life. Even if this is not true, she leads me to believe it from her sunny disposition and from her failure to ask about my queer experience. As sisters, how are we to wrestle our legacies? How do we talk about the queer non-acceptance, prejudice, and problematic stereotypes we grew up with? And the turning away that has led to my isolation? The universality of having coffee is no doubt a start.

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It's late Friday night and I've stayed in on my own  
to eat cheese on toast  
and watch *our Nic* in 'Being the Ricardos'

I'm flanked by three dogs and two cats  
on the leather sofa  
(bought in my aspirational acquisition phase)  
an aesthetically pleasing  
item of furniture, but not so comfortable  
for the six of us all  
and I'm thinking about how much love I have for these beasts of mine  
though Robbie, my big Border Collie is farting like he dined on Souvlakis  
when your text comes through  
announcing your visit  
next March, or maybe April  
will I be around?  
can we do coffee?  
and as the gastric acid rises from my stomach  
to forewarn me I'll not sleep tonight  
because of my head, my head, my head  
having to thrash about all you are  
no – all you and me and we are not  
all we have messed up  
concepts I'm less clear on since our parents died  
and took their chaos with them  
so I reply with a 'sure I'll be around  
and coffee would be great'  
while hoping I'll be saved by another pandemic  
eek! what fool of monster could think such a thing?

if our mother was still alive  
she'd give me THAT look  
as if I had the power  
to mutate Omicron to a new JEN strain  
THAT same look she gave if we ever let loose with a 'fuck' or a 'bloody' or a 'shit,'  
though we didn't learn our swear words in school  
remember? me on the stairs...you somewhere...I don't know where  
Mum didn't – I guess couldn't – censor every drama in our household  
we weren't *Neighbours* for fuck's sake  
though when you went to England, I bet you pretended we were  
I know I did  
but I only lasted there a year, not like you – who escaped for a lifetime  
not that I resented you for it...  
I only wanted acknowledgement I gave into  
Mum's pull – her need – y'know  
after she died  
I crumbled, lost and bereft  
everyone thought it was because we were so close – her and I –  
but after she died I lost my mirror –  
which is weird when she saw a different image –  
when she left, there was no one to reflect the boundaries of my being  
'Jen's a ghost' I heard people say  
complicated bereavement turned  
into major depression turned  
into chronic depression

turned into  
time  
a  
dot  
marked as survival  
if imagined intentions don't count  
counted as a bonus even if the glass is only half full  
it's been seven years since that hearse drove off with my insides  
and I said 'No shit Sherlock,' to the baby-faced ED doctor  
who told my ECG I had broken heart syndrome  
I had to rest for three months – no running or cycling –  
strenuous exercise banned to let my poor heart heal  
as simple as that  
but it wasn't, was it?  
you and I were so driven  
to fight the fight  
to take up where Mum and Dad left off  
our fancy words replaced their fists  
never saying what needed to be said  
to bridge our enormous gulf  
but now  
if I was to start a real conversation with you, I'd say  
we were raised in a way  
that for one of us to exist the other had to not breathe  
pitted against each other

in a race to seek the highest favour  
but our playing fields were never level  
you, sweet pretty you, dripping your easy beige Stepford happiness  
and odd little me – the queer one – a mind at war with a body –  
I didn't share with you growing up  
anything truthfully  
like who I wanted to love  
and why I only wanted to wear jeans and look like the boy  
you teased me of being  
and so as we grew older  
it was you, who called me 'emotionally immature' instead of 'sensitive soul'  
and me who called you 'deserter' instead of 'survivor'  
and now we bury our despair  
with our rage  
and fears  
imagine if we discussed all you are  
all you and me and we are not

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