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

Description

The AutoEthnographer

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

Authorâ??s Memo

Written in the conversational spirit of Frank Oâ??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 sisterâ??s first text message, but as emotions escalate, intensity builds to create a stream of consciousness effect.

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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 â??our Nic,â?? 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.

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My sister and I were divided through the fear, silence, secrecy, and shame that family violence creates. Our parentâ??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 motherâ??s death. My motherâ??s vulnerability led to a mutual dependency and without her I was unmoored. The time after our parentsâ?? 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.

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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 â??easy beige Stepford happiness,â?? 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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By Annie Spratt for Unsplash

Itâ??s late Friday night and Iâ??ve stayed in on my own

to eat cheese on toast

and watch *our Nic* in â??Being the Ricardosâ??

Iâ??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 Iâ??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 Iâ??ll not sleep tonight

because of my head, my head, my head

having to thrash about all you are

no â?? all you and me and we are not

all we have messed up

concepts Iâ??m less clear on since our parents died

and took their chaos with them

so I reply with a â??sure Iâ??ll be around

and coffee would be greatâ??

while hoping Iâ??ll be saved by another pandemic

eek! what fool of monster could think such a thing?

if our mother was still alive

sheâ??d give me THAT look

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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 â??fuckâ?? or a â??bloodyâ?? or a â??shit,â??

though we didnâ??t learn our swear words in school

remember? me on the stairsâ?¦you somewhereâ?¦I donâ??t know where

Mum didnâ??t â?? I guess couldnâ??t â?? censor every drama in our household

we werenâ??t *Neighbours* for fuckâ??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 â?? who escaped for a lifetime

not that I resented you for itâ?¦

I only wanted acknowledgement I gave into

Mumâ??s pull â?? her need â?? yâ??know

after she died

I crumbled, lost and bereft

everyone thought it was because we were so close â?? her and I â??

but after she died I lost my mirror â??

which is weird when she saw a different image â??

when she left, there was no one to reflect the boundaries of my being

â??Jenâ??s a ghostâ?? I heard people say

complicated bereavement turned

into major depression turned

into chronic depression

turned into

time

a

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dot

marked as survival

if imagined intentions donâ??t count

counted as a bonus even if the glass is only half full

itâ??s been seven years since that hearse drove off with my insides

and I said â??No shit Sherlock,â?? to the baby-faced ED doctor

who told my ECG I had broken heart syndrome

I had to rest for three months â?? no running or cycling â??

strenuous exercise banned to let my poor heart heal

as simple as that

but it wasnâ??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, Iâ??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 â?? the queer one â?? a mind at war with a body â??

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I didnâ??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 â??emotionally immatureâ?? instead of â??sensitive soulâ??

and me who called you â??deserterâ?? instead of â??survivorâ??

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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Credits

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