

DUCKS

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There's a smell in the air that neither of them wants to mention. Two or three gnats roam the beams of sunlight pushing through the still air of the kitchen. No one opens the windows any more because no one can reach them.

Some days there's not much to say. They listen to the house creaking. Anais says it's the house settling. June points out that it's been twenty years now she's been living here, and sixty before that it's stood, and all the time settling without being settled. That's a fair amount of restless energy.

The arthritic dog next door begins barking blindly, going berserk at falling leaves or at memories of plucky paper boys cutting across fresh lawns with their bicycles. He doesn't have the wind to keep it up for long.

'You know, I've been thinking,' June says. 'There's nothing special about here. This place. Who cares where you live? No one talks to anyone. It's not like there's any sense of community any more. It must be the same kind of thing a dog feels when you throw him in someone's backyard for long enough. He thinks he loves it, so he defends it. Someone threw me in Elwood, and I patrol these streets like they mean something to me.' She tugs a plastic-wrapped package of cigarettes out of her handbag. 'But God, I do love this place.'

Anais lifts the mug full of bourbon to her face, drinks, coughs, puts it down. 'I don't care about any of that. You're talking just to hear yourself talk.'

June scratches through her thin white hair. Can feel her pink scalp beneath her fingers. 'I think I'm going bald.' Cups her gigantic, sagging breasts and lifts them weightily. 'And these things keep on growing. Why?

Getting this old is like stepping off the genetic map. My earlobes are going to touch my shoulders soon.'

Anais takes another loud sip from her mug. 'No wonder no one wants to talk to you any more. You should talk about sensible things. Like the Olympics. You should watch the swimming.'

'The swimming? They should have people like *me* swimming, and then maybe I'd watch. These young, half-naked seals all look alike. Why should I care? They've got people winning for Australia. I want someone to win for Elwood.' She taps the pack of cigarettes, which she just bought from the Seven-Eleven on the corner of Broadway and Ormond. She taps them on the kitchen table for a few reflective seconds. She unwraps the plastic and realises she forgot to buy a lighter or matches.

'I need something to light these.' She talks around the long white cylinder of tobacco.

'You don't smoke,' Anais tells June.

'I used to smoke. I was a chimney,' June tells Anais.

'When?' Anais asks, putting down her mug carefully. 'When were you ever a chimney?'

'Forty years ago. But there's no point now fighting the inevitable. Once a smoker, always a smoker. The Olympics make me want to smoke.'

'I'm not giving you a lighter. This is stupid.' Anais finishes her mug of bourbon. 'And to tell you the truth, I'm feeling ... shame-faced. That it's come to this. Drinking with you on a Sunday morning, when I should probably be at church or the library. I should be respectable by now.'

'You should be vacuuming this floor. Look at the lino. It's disgusting.'

'What are you talking about? It's not disgusting. You and your giant breasts propped on my kitchen table are disgusting.' Anais refuses to look down at the kitchen floor.

'I brought over a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips last week, and I spilt some of the crumbs from the bottom of the bag. And there they are right now.'

'You didn't come over last week.'

'Well, the week before that. Which is even worse.'

'I think they're crumbs from something else. I had nachos the other night. It's probably from that.'

'I want to get back to my point.' June gets up and begins hunting in the messy kitchen drawers for a lighter. She opens and closes cupboard doors, finds a half-eaten sandwich on a plate in one of them. In the oven there's a burned bird carcass—charcoal, with a beak still on it, probably a month old. Gnats erupt from the open oven door. Anais waves at June to shut it.

'You look like you're about to take flight,' June tells Anais. She lifts a hand to her mouth. 'What's my point?' she asks.

'People like you competing at the Olympics, for Elwood. Ridiculous.'

'Don't you say anything bad about Elwood. I love this neighbourhood. They don't like to speak over the fences any more. It doesn't matter. It's still Elwood.'

'You should find one of those shirts saying "I heart Elwood".' Anais furtively shoos away a few gnats now orbiting her head like a miniature solar system.

'I'd buy one, I'll tell you that for nothing. But I hate it when people say "I heart" anything. It's obviously "I love" something. It never used to be "I heart NY", but "I love New York", and now it's "I heart something". What's going on? Are the dyslexics taking over the world?' She finds a matchbox on top of the fridge, but has to hunt through burned-out matches to get one that's still got a red tip.

'What about "I heart silence"?' Anais takes the bottle of bourbon from under the table and pours herself another half-mug. 'What about "I heart euthanasia"?'

'I want to keep the machines on. Keep them going for as long as possible. Don't believe it when they tell you I'm brain dead. I'm in there somewhere.'

'As if anyone is going to ask me. Besides which, I don't think they'd even bother with machines for you. Your smoking again makes it even worse. They hate smokers. It even makes your toes rot now. I've seen pictures. These days they'd probably pour something combustible over you. Light a match.'

'I don't believe in cremation. You can't put people in ovens, give someone a thingamajig full of ashes. And they expect you to take it home. I don't want someone's remains on the top of my fridge. They should give

you a commemorative ashtray at least.' Holding up the lit cigarette, 'Where do I ash this?'

Anais levers herself to semi-erect standing, and with slow crablike movements moves along the kitchen table and out of the room, returning a few moments later with a white plastic ashtray, the blue and red stripes around its radius faded, its centre embossed with the Footscray Football Club logo. A snarling bulldog looks up through old black smoulder marks.

June looks at the bulldog and feels sorry for him. Thrown in there like that. The people who should love him putting out their cigarettes on him. Where's the club loyalty in that? They should have used the little blue boy of Carlton Football Club for the Footscray fans. Or the magpies. The eagles and swans. The whole menagerie. But why this poor dog, who only wanted to defend something?

Anais says, 'You look like you're about to cry. Don't think about cremation. Someone has to *want* cremation. They don't just put you in an oven like a Sunday roast.'

'But I don't like worms any better. I don't like the idea of them crawling around in there with their hungry little mouths. I don't even like gardening. If they could just think of a better way.' Her eyes follow the ribbon of cigarette smoke up to the mould-spotted ceiling. 'I'd prefer just to vanish.'

'Maybe the next time they're testing a nuclear weapon they could put you underneath it,' Anais suggests.

'Are you losing your marbles? Australia doesn't have nuclear weapons.'

'Well, we probably should. At least a few of them. Have you seen how many American tourists there are these days? They obviously want to take over.'

'I don't want a nuclear explosion, in any case. That's just like ashes, but smaller. I like the idea of evaporation. Like a dream rising from the pillows of my bed.' June smiles—she's always thought of herself as a poetic soul.

'That's the way it was with Henry,' says Anais. 'He had a smile on his face. And an erection. It was really wonderful. He must have been thinking of me when he died. He always said I was cream, and his taste of paradise this side of the Milky Way.'

(end of excerpt)