

Cigarettes and T-Shirts (2,855 words)

Pia's son

Pia says she was cooking three types of soup from scratch for her cousin who was dying in hospital, she tries to remember what kind of soups and can only remember two of the three, and there was a big pile of blankets that her son left on the floor between the bathroom and toilet and she couldn't get into the toilet. She asked her teenage son to move the blankets and he wouldn't, and as he was packing his things to go off to his father's to live (she kicked him out of the house after the blanket thing), she saw a pile of his neatly stacked t-shirts, grabbed them, and threw them off the balcony. Her son came out of his bedroom and saw what she'd done, then picked up a chair, an original 1960s chair, her father's second wife had a lot of 60s stuff, and though she, Pia, didn't particularly like the 60s, she'd taken the two Seidler chair because they were low, not good for her, but good for her son because he has long legs (she demonstrated now how her son would sit in the Seidler chairs), and also because the chairs being low, the backs of them were the right height for the living room in the spot near the sideboard that her son hated.

Her son, seeing what she had done with his neatly stacked t-shirts, picked up one of the 1960s chairs, which was made of plastic, and smashed it on the ground, broke it, yes smashed it on the ground, yes broke it, yes smashed it, well it already had a crack in it, but yes he smashed it, then he went outside to get his t-shirts from downstairs. And then she, Pia, locked him out using the little button lock that she hoped would work though she wasn't sure, but when he came back upstairs and tried to get inside she saw that yes, the button lock worked and he couldn't get in, so then he started bashing on the door, making a huge noise, and then he went downstairs and began shouting up at her and throwing stones at the window, making so much noise that the neighbours started opening doors and calling out, 'Is everything alright?'

And then she, Pia, decided to call the police, this was while she was making the soup to take to her cousin in hospital using the Bamix or whatever, so she called the police but can you believe it, they took two hours to get there, and when they did get there all they did was have a talk with her son and a talk with her as well about testosterone, she was hoping the talk with the police would make her son realise all of the things he'd done wrong, and then the police left and she finished making the soup and she took the soup down to the car, and as she was driving to the hospital she lost control of the steering and pulled over and got out and saw that her son had let down her two back tyres.

Pia, Anne, Clare, Me, Aging

Pia is aging at the neck and chin, though her face is wrinkle free, unmarked by surface concern, like her expression, which doesn't change when she tells the story about her son and the police. Most awful of all, when she tells me the worst thing that her son said to her, it takes her a moment to say it,

he said to her, 'All of your relationships have broken down, you're alone, you will die alone,' and I kind of follow her lead and let it only affect me on the surface, and I say, 'That is the worst thing, that is the worst thing,' and a cog moves and she putters over into panic.

'Why do you say that, what do you mean the worst thing?' she says, as though suddenly she doesn't know that it is the worst thing and I have to tell her why. And I'm thrown now, I have to come up with something that's not going to destroy her, because I see that she is destroyed, though I hadn't seen that until now, and I tell the truth because I can't think of anything else. I say, 'Because that's what we tell ourselves in our very worst moments, isn't it? It's what I tell *myself*, that I'm alone and that I'm going to die alone.' And she seems unsettled that I have confirmed that yes, this is the very worst thing.

Anne's aging is mostly around the eyes, the under-eyes puffy with fluid and whiter than the rest of the skin, the bracket lines around her mouth deep. It's as though her aging has come from talking and seeing, her aging isn't hiding, but is actively expressing itself for her to show us.

Clare's aging is around her lips, her mouth marked from being pursed, as though she's a smoker, but inhaling and gripping anger instead of cigarettes. The rest of her face droops with the depression of her difficult view of the world and her certainty that she part of the group, outside of our mini group, who experience it with the most difficulty.

Me, it's in the folds of my cheeks, only showing when I smile, and I am willing to consider not smiling to conceal the lines.

Ordering

There's a muddle over milk, as in who gets the soy milk with their tea, not the right person it seems, it looks like two soy milks have turned up though the young waiter denies it. He returns with more non soy milk, then Anne calls him back to tell him that during the kerfuffle over milk, her tea has stewed, it's too strong to drink, and she needs a new pot. The waiter obliges but mistakes it for meaning that Anne wants a weaker pot of tea, which is not what she means, and when Anne pours the new pot, she calls another waiter over, explains the misunderstanding, and orders a third. Anne's food order is complicated, with changes to the way things are listed on the menu. Can't she just leave the fried potatoes to the side of her plate and not eat it? Why does she have to have it removed from her plate, making things difficult for the waiter? Anne's ordering process takes a long time, and during this time I start noticing that whilst we are all in shade, the sun on the corrugated plastic roof is over my face. Anne is sitting on the same side of the table as me, and I look at her face and see shadows and sunlight, and because I have been thinking about pretty much nothing except aging for the past couple of months, I move my chair so I'm totally out of the sun.

Toilets

The café is situated in a park. There's a normal looking door that appears to lead to a normal bathroom, with a fake vintage sign on it, but when you open the door you're outside in the park, and you have to walk along a stone path to what is the park's public toilets. A young mother with a little girl sees my confusion and calls out, 'They're over here if you're looking for the toilets, that's where we are going too,' and she stops to let me go first in a show of manners, and then doesn't stop talking to her little girl in an overly loud voice, as though the little girl is thick. 'Do you want to do a number one or a number two, a number one or a number two?' she says over and over, but the little girl doesn't answer, as though she, even if the woman doesn't, understands that the question is embarrassing and intrusive.

There are two small stalls the size of toilet cubicles on planes. In my toilet, a pale grey lump sits at the bottom of the water, leached of anything obviously offensive, and because of that it looks like a dead finger. I perch over the seat.

Park

After lunch we sit at one of the outdoor tables in the park and I make sure I'm not facing the sun because there is no way in the world I'm adding to my aging today. My back is to the sun and I look at Pia and Anne with an admiration mixed with a total lack of understanding that they can let their faces be in full sunshine in the middle of the day. How is it that Pia's beautiful golden face is unmarked, but her neck and chest are starting to drape, as though the skin there is a different type? Red thread veins are visible all over Anne's face. She has a drinker's nose but barely drinks anything. There are a few murmurs about how I always wear sunscreen and a hat and how my skin still looks okay, and for a moment the last months of my intense concern about aging vanish, and I feel chirpy enough to talk explicitly about it, about how I have it worse than the others because my boyfriend is so much younger than me (unbelievable that I forget the exact number of years and say fourteen at first, but it's sixteen).

Anne seems to sit so freely in her aging and says that the first thing her husband says to her every morning, yes EVERY morning when they wake up, is that she's the most beautiful woman in the world, and she seems to believe him. In sixteen years, I say, we will all be seventy and my boyfriend will be the age we are now, and they grow concerned for me in a way I don't even feel for myself, I mean I'm concerned but I'm also mocking my concern, I'm bashing my concern with a bat, I am hitting my concern to get it the hell away from me, and then I see, all of a sudden, that I am shouting and being raucous in public. Their concern though is grave. But he LOVES you, they say, he'll still LOVE you when you're seventy, and I try to tell them that MY concern is, 'Well picture this,' I say, 'he starts a new job at the age we're at now, still young we think, we still feel young, (though Clare says she doesn't), and I'm invited out with his new work colleagues and they're the age we are now and I'm a seventy year old woman.' I wait for them to laugh, but they go quiet and look

worried. 'I mean I'm worried,' I say, 'but I'm not worried worried.' And they sit quietly looking at me, as though they know something about my future that I am yet to recognise.

Bodies

Clare says she has started to feel aging in her body, that she can feel certain parts of her body breaking down, her wrist for example, she's had a workers comp thing already about her wrist, and when I ask what it is, if it's repetitive strain injury, she says it's from picking up files, and that doesn't seem real to me, not the injury, that seems real, but the cause of it, picking up files. She says she also feels aging in her feet, knees and shoulders. I say, 'And all our tits are getting lower,' and she laughs, then tentatively she says she's putting on weight, mostly because of the medication she takes for depression, but also, she admits, because of what she eats.

Pia says she's putting on weight too, and to avoid revealing that I've noticed this, I say what I've been saying to Pia for as long as I've known her, though today I feel I'm saying it to make up for not tactfully managing the story about her son. 'But you look like a pretty French farm girl,' I say, a silly thing to say to someone who has called the police on her son.

Dating

Clare tells us about an over 50s dating site she's been on, well a dating AND friendship site, called Stitch. You can meet up with people to go out on group outings, or you can go out with a single person too. Yes, she HAS been on some dates, all no good. One man, aged sixty six she exclaims (younger than how old I'll be when my boyfriend is our age now), wanted to hold hands the second time they went out, wanted to kiss, a FULL kiss the third time they went out, and eventually she had to say that strange, overused phrase, SORRY I AM NOT READY FOR THIS. 'It was too much too soon,' she says, and I say, 'Yes, we're not the twelve year old sluts we once were.'

When we were those twelve year old sluts, we smoked our first cigarettes in this park. Clare's childhood house, where she is living again with her father, is just down the road. I'm pretty sure I vomited after those cigarettes. We were sitting in the shade under a tree. Clare stole the cigarettes from her mother. Her mother, even back then, was an aged woman who seemed to smoke from worry. I don't say anything about the smoking to Clare.

Hairdresser

Afterwards I leave it too late to get to my hairdressing appointment by public transport. In full sun, though thankfully facing away from it, I walk from the park to the highway, sweating, looking up my horoscope on my phone, hoping for luck, hoping for happy change, hoping for better things. The astrologer is running late this week. He's posted a message in red saying that the week's predictions will be up some time in the next forty eight hours, and I keep looking ahead and behind me, hoping for a taxi, but there are no taxis in this suburb where I grew up. I reach the highway and wait.

Eventually I see a taxi. The driver doesn't want to have to type the hairdresser's address into his GPS, so I put it in my phone and direct him from the back seat.

The hairdresser's young assistant sits me down in the chair at the basins. She is her usual vacant, mildly irritated, passive self. She's wearing a latex glove over one of her hands and stares into space as she puts on my cloak. Her hair is very long and otherwise nondescript, her face is plain and unhappy, and I imagine how much she is attached to the length of her hair and envied for it by other girls. I hate her washing my hair. I tell her I don't want my scalp massaged, but still I feel her long fingers spreading down past my ears so that shampoo goes into my face and I worry about allergic reactions. She has turned on the chair's massage setting which I hate, and uncomfortable plastic knuckles beat against my back. The girl is skinny. I imagine she's envied for that too, by other girls. It seems she barely rinses off the suds, and I reach around to feel the ends of my hair, expecting them to be slimy or frothy, but they feel okay. Once I glimpsed her out the back in the kitchen, giggling with one of the other young girls who has since been sacked. Her teeth are pointy and I don't trust that she's used a clean glass when she brings me some water.

Home

My hair looks great and I don't want to go home to my boyfriend. I shop half-heartedly, try on some clothes, then sit in a bar and have a beer that makes me dizzy but not tipsy. On the train home I watch a handsome guy assess me and the younger woman sitting next to me, and I see that he ignores me and stares instead at the younger woman who has good legs but that's about it. I've noticed this a lot. In some weird way, although I am conscious of every sign of aging in myself, I expect men, young men, not to notice, and am surprised when I'm overlooked.

I sleep in the spare room on my own that night. I secretly make myself a gin and soda, hiding the glass when I hear my boyfriend coming into the kitchen, and in my makeshift bed I can feel myself falling asleep but there are things I want to think about, like Pia's son and Anne's husband and Clare's dates and the unwanted kisses. I look up Stitch and create a profile so I can take a look around, but the website requires a photo, 'recent, showing your full face,' and I don't want to do that so I just look at the main page that has photos of happy looking women and men with lots of wrinkles, and then I turn off my phone and the last thing I think about before sleep are those emblems of youth, cigarettes and t-shirts.