

FICTION

MORNING SONG

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THE WOMAN WHO stands on the door-step is short and chunky. Her legs are like an elephant's. They go up from her feet and down from her hips without contour or curve. Her hair is coloured a bright hot red. Henna hair: curly, messy. Already, around her face, curls are plastered to her sticky, pink skin. Already, there are lines of sweat where her vest has been trapped between the tumbles and turns of her stomach. It's late spring, but the summer is here, already, slashing up the street in gleams and glares of hard, white light.

The woman who answers the door is very tall and very thin. She is wearing a suit: grey, tailored, costly. Her fair hair has been carefully coloured and blow-waved. Her face is made up in soft pastel shades. She wears amber in her ears and a matching pendant hangs around her neck, huge and heavy and cool. She could be thirty. She could be forty.

The women embrace.

INSIDE, THE CHUNKY woman waits for her friend to get ready. She stands in the kitchen and looks out through the vast wall of windows into the blazing garden. Though this is the eighth and worst year of the drought, everything looks lush and green – fecund – and the leaves of the gums flash and glitter as though they have been washed with rain. The chunky woman stares at the perfectly manicured grass. Somehow, it glitters too. From somewhere high up above the house, the sweet syllables of a magpie's song sets the heat shimmering.

The thin woman comes into the kitchen. She turns in a mock pirouette. 'How do I look?' she asks. She smiles. She laughs, then she is fanning her hot, wet eyes with one of her hands. 'Oh God,' she laughs, 'Sorry,' she laughs. Her tears brim, but they do not fall, not even when her voice stumbles as she looks down at the chunky woman's worried face and says, 'Is it too soon? Is it? Is it?'

The chunky woman takes her friend's shaking hands and squeezes them and kisses them. She shrugs.

Again, the magpie yodels.

'Be careful,' the thin woman says, pulling her hands free. 'There's

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a nest,' she says, pointing to the ceiling, 'and they're swooping.' She smiles again and jerks her narrow shoulders back theatrically. She stands tall and nods. She gathers her things and gathers herself and makes to leave. Suddenly, she half turns and awkwardly kisses the chunky woman full on the lips. 'Thanks,' she says, as the chunky woman laughs and pushes her away and slaps her backside and wipes her mouth with mock disgust.

The thin woman hurries down the hall and out into the scorching street.

The chunky woman bends and presses her damp, red face against the cool cool marble of the counter-top.

THE CHUNKY WOMAN sits on a chair next to the baby's cot. The radio plays from the kitchen. There is an empty cup of coffee on the floor next to her. She looks at the baby. Looks out the window. On the fence (hopping left, looking in; hopping right, looking in) is the magpie.

The chunky woman looks across at the baby. He is asleep. His fat arms are thrown up above his head, fists clenched. His eyes scrunch up occasionally, as if his dreams worry him. The chunky woman looks out again at the bird.

The magpie is large and with each hop and turn, the slick of her feathers flash back the glare. Her black nostrils slice through the white base of her beak near her satiny face; its pointed tip is oil-black, dagger-sharp, granite-hard. She hops left, she hops right. She cocks a reddish eye at the window. Hops left, hops right. She is looking at something, looking for something. Perhaps she is just looking at her reflection.

'Looking for baby, birdy?' the chunky woman asks, standing. With her movement the bird drops from the fence, glides down and then swoops up and away, out of sight.

The chunky woman turns back to the cot. She runs one finger up the baby's arm. His skin is as soft and thin as tissue. It is an odd colour, blotchy, splotched with pink and blue. The chunky woman stares. The baby is very still. The chunky woman stares. She makes a coughing

sound. The baby is not moving. There is no lift of chest, no flicker under his thin bluish eyelids. Perhaps three seconds pass, perhaps thirty, perhaps a minute.

Suddenly, the chunky woman lunges over the edge of the cot, her hands ahead of her, and she is shaking the baby's tummy, shaking the whole baby with her hand on his tummy. 'Breathe,' she says, her voice cracking. '*Breathe* you bastard!'

The baby's face suddenly contorts. The baby arches its back, splutters and then gulps up a big, grumbling breath. Its arms spasm above its head and then settle back into their luxurious, reclined pose.

The baby breathes regularly again. The chunky woman stands over him, watching. She places the tip of her finger in the baby's now open hand. Anemone like, his fingers clench around hers. His grip is strong. Carefully, she disentangles herself from him. She steps away from the cot.

The chunky woman wanders around the room, picking things up, putting them down. There are soft toys in a box under the window. There are piles of tiny, neatly ironed clothes and a mountain of disposable nappies on a chest of drawers. Against the back wall, lined up on the white-painted bookshelves, are dozens of books. The chunky woman runs her finger along the titles. Lots of familiar names. She selects a book whose author she does not know, and takes it back to her chair. She opens it to a random page.

'Jesus,' she mutters. She studies a picture of a woman on all fours in an inflatable paddling pool of water. From between the woman's buttocks, or so it seems from the angle of the camera, a mucousy, bloody baby's head is emerging. Next to the woman a naked man is also on all fours. He seems to be cheering the woman on. It must be an old photo. The woman wears a sweatband around her forehead, as does the man, who also has a long curly mullet framing his big, cheesy smile. The chunky woman slams the book shut. She drops it onto the floor where it lands with a loud, wet slap.

The baby mumbles.

After a moment, the chunky woman stands, picks up the book, dusts it off and returns it to the shelf. She wanders back to the cot.

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The baby's face ripples. Suddenly, his eyes flash open and he begins to holler.

The chunky woman stands over him, watching. 'Wah wah wah,' she says, staring down at the suddenly red, suddenly wrinkly face. The baby's arms begin to punch about. His legs kick the flannelette blanket so that his naked, napped body and his straining, arching belly are uncovered.

The chunky woman sits down again and looks out the window.

The baby keeps crying. Not louder and louder, not softer and softer, just a steady monotone yelling.

Eventually, the chunky woman stands and returns to the baby. She reaches into the cot and pulls back the sheet. 'You stink,' she says, inspecting the mattress and the covers.

'You stink,' she says, again, picking him up and carrying him at arms' length to the plastic-sheeted change table.

She lays him down and opens his nappy. A greenish-yellow stench is smeared over everything. She turns her head away as much as she can. She lifts the baby's legs with one hand and extracts the nappy with the other, then quickly, quickly, she folds the mess away, wrapping it up tightly in a plastic bag. She grabs a handful of wet-wipes and cleans the mess from the baby's body and the plastic sheeting. She packs the filthy wipes into another plastic bag.

'Deeee-sgusting!' she says, smiling down at his clean naked body. His eyes are opened wide. He smiles. 'Dee-dee-deeeeee-sgusting,' she says and he laughs. He looks up at her red curly head. He blinks, blinks, and then looks over her head at the mobile hanging from the ceiling. It turns and sways and casts rainbows across the walls. His face is no longer an ugly red. His eyes are a pale, staring blue. He has a large, bald, bulbous forehead. The chunky woman traces the ridge where the left and right parts of his brain meet. She touches the wide crater of his belly button. She presses into it. The baby does not seem to mind. She studies his perfectly formed fingers and toes; each of his tiny translucent nails. She looks at his smooth firm nostrils, the sheen of skin on his eyelids, his almost invisible lashes and brows, his thin pink, wet wet lips. His mouth opens (grizzling, grizzling), revealing

naked, bone-hard gums. She looks at the loose skin between his legs. She gently pokes it with her finger, watching the skin flop about as he joyfully kicks his feet.

The baby doesn't register her disgust. Instead, he laughs at her again, smiling, his hands reaching for her face.

She gets a fresh nappy. About to change him, she hesitates. He has suddenly become quiet and still. He's concentrating. The chunky woman stands back, watching, unsure. Suddenly, his penis stiffens and a neat arc of urine sprays the chunky woman in the face and across her front. Silent and furious, she stands there, dripping. Silent, she stands there and looks down at his squirming form. The baby kicks his legs again. He chuckles and plucks at the air with his hands.

BABY IS IN his cot: fed, tucked in and seemingly content to be left on his own. With the babycom in tow, the chunky woman wanders around the thin woman's house.

Everything is spotless. It is all whiteness and windows, slate and steel. Now and again, all of this is broken up by crude slashes of colour. The chunky woman stops to look, to touch. Here, a handmade cushion on the cream leather couch, gaudy and clumsy and bright. There, a picture of the thin woman and her husband and the baby: all of them smile out from a cheap, plastic, baby-blue frame cast in the shape of a rabbit. Here, a bundle of purple knitting, shoved in a bag under the wrought iron and glass coffee table. Now and again the chunky woman puts the babycom to her ear. Baby mumbles to himself. He giggles and jabbers and gripes and threatens tears. She walks into the main bedroom. There is wood in this room. There is an expensive old-fashioned bed with heavy jarrah drawers on either side of it. There is a huge wooden wardrobe. Red curtains frame the tall sash window. A deep red blanket covers the bed. The chunky woman sits on it. She puts the babycom down next to her and lifts the prickly red wool to her face and listens as the baby chatters on and on.

The drawers are covered in books. There are blood-blotched tissues rumped next to them. There is a ring, a pair of earrings, and

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a letter. The chunky woman picks up the letter. She flicks through it, then she reads it, and then she carefully rearranges it on the gleaming wood. She leans forward and opens the top drawer. There are more letters in here, each stamped, like the other, with a foreign stamp. Photographs of the same elderly couple stick out from some of the envelopes. There are some overseas souvenirs: key rings, postcards, a cigarette lighter in the shape of a naked woman with 'Paris' emblazoned across her breasts. The chunky woman flicks the lighter on: the figure's head reels back and a flame bursts out of her severed neck. There are more photos right at the back of the drawer, carefully folded between sheets of fine yellow paper. These are not like the photos staged around the house, not like the photos of the thin woman's parents in the letters. These are photos of the thin woman as a baby, as a toddler, as a girl. These are photos of the thin woman and the chunky woman as teenagers, as twenty-somethings. In one of these, they are all wrapped up in each other on a picnic rug somewhere, their tightly jeaned legs entwined, their bright shirts twisted and rolled up to reveal tanned arms and stomachs. They are kissing and laughing. There's a photo of the thin woman's husband sunning himself next to a scabby Heeler on someone's veranda. There's a photo of him naked, running into the surf. There's a more recent photo of him, asleep in this bed with his arms thrown over his head just as the baby's were this morning. There are photos of other men too, men the chunky woman does not know.

The last picture stops the chunky woman short. She places all of the photos on the bed next to her. She holds this final image up, tilting it so that the light shines on it in just the right way. There is the baby, filling up most of the frame. His head is conical, squashed. His forehead and shoulders are covered in black fuzz, slicked with blood and gunk. He is naked. There is a clip on his severed umbilical cord. If it weren't for his scream-torn face, he'd look dead. The thin woman's face is behind the baby's, looking at the photographer. Her hair is sweat-salted into hard ropes, her scalp shining around the base of each twisted clump. There are tears streaming down her bloated, blotched face. The chunky woman sits up. With one shaking hand, she

neatly flicks the tears from her eyes, flick flick, flick flick. She picks up the bloodied tissue from the chest of drawers and carefully dabs her face. She sniffs, sharply, replaces the tissue, and then she sets about jumbling the photographs back into order and returning them to the back of the drawer.

LATE IN THE afternoon, the chunky woman takes the disgruntled baby into the yard. It is mild, the sun is low.

‘What do you want?’ the chunky woman asks, holding the baby in one arm whilst spreading a blanket onto the artificial turf with the other. The baby squirms in her clutch. He grizzles. She looks down at him as his face creases and he lets out a long, sorrowful yowl.

The chunky woman laughs. She carefully lays him on his stomach. He stops crying. She watches as he tries to lift himself up. His head remains face down, flat on the blanket. His hands open and close, clutching at the rough wool.

‘Stupid,’ the chunky woman says, and gently turns him on his back. ‘Stupid baby.’

The chunky woman lies next to him. They stare up at the canopy of the gum trees. The deep peachy pink of their trunks and branches glow in the light of the lowering sun. The bark stretches up the tree’s length, smooth as skin, gathering into gentle folds around the tree’s amputations and knots and the explosions of sap that burst, at points, from its body.

The baby begins to settle. Together, he and the chunky woman watch the long thin silhouettes of the leaves move above them. Blotches of light dance over their faces and warm their skin. The baby’s hands are trying to catch the shadows, or the light, or the leaves, or the sky, or the breeze that is blowing up a dry symphony around them.

‘Look,’ the chunky woman says, pointing upwards.

The baby kicks his legs about. He ignores her.

The magpie hops about on one of the gum’s knotted pink arms. She hops, looks down, hops, leans over to get a better look at them and almost topples off the branch.

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The chunky woman laughs.

The magpie scrambles about, rights herself and stares down again, her dark eyes twitching.

The chunky woman only lets her swoop once.

As the bird arcs towards them, the chunky woman reaches her arm out and over the baby, covering his face, while her other hand firmly presses out at the bird, like a policeman directing traffic to a stop. The bird understands. She swoops silently across them and over to the neighbour's almond tree by the fence. There, she turns, hops, cocks her head and continues to watch them.

The chunky woman rolls over and positions her chest over the baby, raising herself up on her elbows so that her shoulders hide him from the magpie's view. Deprived of the blotches of light and the distant dance of the gum's leaves, the baby begins to grizzle.

'Don't cry,' the chunky woman says, loudly. Then she growls: 'Don't!'

The baby hesitates. One of his hands flings out and smacks the chunky woman's chin. The baby laughs and kicks his legs.

'Bad baby!' the chunky woman says, her voice angry. She thumps her hands down on either side of the baby's head. The plastic grass crackles.

The baby's whole body freezes, he stares. His wet lips tremble.

'You know what happens to bad bad bay-bees?' she sings.

The baby smiles and spits and laughs and kicks the chunky woman's breasts with his soft bare feet.

She recites a spectrum of noises and expressions.

Baby follows her in a spectrum of reactions.

She pinches and prods him. He laughs. He frowns. He hovers on tears.

She clicks her fingers about his head. His eyes dart around, his head moves, looking for the sound.

She moves a pointed finger back and forth from one of his eyes. He blinks. His hands reach out, clutching for her.

'Good bay-bee,' she sings.

Eventually, the chunky woman rolls away. The blotches of light

resume their dance across the baby's pale, wriggling form. She looks around for the magpie. The bird is gone.

The chunky woman looks over again at the baby. She rests a hand on his belly. The baby ignores her. She props herself up. She surveys the empty garden again and goes inside.

SHE CAN SEE the baby from where she works. Heavy and slow, she prepares another bottle of the thin woman's milk.

As she comes back outside with his bottle, the chunky woman smiles at the baby, clucking her tongue. She kneels next to him and looks down. He stares straight back, assessing her again. He smiles and slaps at the air and jiggles his feet about. Carefully, she picks him up. Carefully, she crooks him in her arm. The eternal maternal pose, she thinks, tucking him in closer.

Rocking him, she sucks the rubber nipple, warming it, wetting it, then she rubs it across the baby's lips. His mouth opens, slimy and red and reaching. The chunky woman stops rocking and pulls the rubber away. She pulls down the low-cut cotton neck of her own top. She carefully takes her breast out of her bra. The baby does not hesitate. He reaches for her. She winces as his hard gums clamp down on her nipple. His hands clutch and pluck at her skin. His face is drawn in on itself, concentrating, as he begins to suck.

For a while, the chunky woman sits there, just like that. She sits very still, and looks down at the baby's hot mouth clamped on her nipple.

Soon, the baby begins to grumble. Suddenly he withdraws and pushes her breast away. He starts to wail.

The chunky woman watches him. Then, again, she takes the bottle and sucks the rubber nipple. Again, she rubs it against the baby's mouth. He stops crying and latches onto it. His hands come up and grip her fingers. As he sucks she puts her breast back into her bra and rearranges her shirt.

The baby concentrates, sucking and sucking and sucking until he begins to fall asleep. The chunky woman looks down at the grass near

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her feet. She counts the dark plastic blades which are lit up, each and every one, by the warming light of the last sun.

When the back door slides open, the chunky woman looks up. With a smooth dull thud it rolls shut again. The thin woman is standing there, her bag in one hand, staring.

The two women's eyes meet.

'How'd it go?' the chunky woman asks.

The thin woman nods her head slightly, says nothing.

Around them, the night-song of the crickets begins to pulse.

From where she kneels, the chunky woman holds the baby up, offering him back to his mother.

Her friend walks over. She puts down her bag and picks the baby up. She cuddles him close, helping him latch back onto the rubber nipple of the bottle.

The chunky woman rocks back onto her heels, ready to rise, but as she stands something flashes between her and her friend, making her stumble backwards. A blur of black and white. A soft papery beat. The magpie swoops between the two women and then whips up, up into the gum tips.

The chunky woman stands and stares into the blackening leaves. There is nothing to see, but as she turns to the thin woman the magpie's song uncurls into the dusk, ringing like a call to prayer.

The chunky woman smiles and looks at her friend.

The thin woman pays no attention. She is wandering in circles around the garden, rocking her baby and singing to him in her soft and tuneless voice.

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