

Waiting

ALEXANDER FORBES

Such a pretty sky.

Want to be a pilot. Jabber on, pretending, zooming through the backyard. "You'll get dirty," mama says. "Come inside." Can't have that, can't get my dresses dirty. Mama makes sure I'm pretty. Pretty like the sky. But Johnny stays outside. I watch. And when mama doesn't watch, we play. As long as I stay clean, so mama doesn't know. Zoom around, we're pilots. Johnny has no dress to keep clean.

I let Ashy get hers dirty.

Don't like it when Brett keeps me waiting. Always worried. Could get hurt. I'll see the car, he won't be there. "I'm sorry", they'll say. Scares me. Have to stop worrying, not good to worry. He'll be home soon. He should have been a pilot. Could have been pilots together. No, can't complain. I'm a good mum. I am. Like mama was.

I think?

I don't know.

Please hurry. Pretty sky's getting darker. Should be home by now.

"Mum?"

"Ashy!"

"Mum, are you gonna come inside? It's getting dark".

Such a pretty voice, nice and soft. Good girl. "Your father's on his way. You should play. Play with Peter before the sun goes away."

Ashy wants to say something, it's painted on her face, but goes inside instead. Wish she'd be more confident. Need confidence to be a pilot.

"Don't be silly," mama says. "Now help me hang these up". Groans as she bends, she's in pain. My fault, I shouldn't play. I should help more, like she says. Like daddy says. Help while Johnny plays. Smile like mama, make things happy. So daddy's happy. So he's not angry.

Not like Brett. I'm very lucky. Where is he? Such a pretty sky.

"Mum?" says Johnny, "Come have some dinner."

Dinner's not for ages. "Mama said I can't get dirty." I look up. But his face... so young.

"Mum?"

"I said I can't play, Johnny!"

Getting dark. Daddy will be home soon. Should help mama get things ready. No time to play. Help and wait. Always waiting. When I'm old, I'll play when I want.

"Johnny!" When did he get here?

Sits next to me. "Ashy's worried, mum."

"You have a new girlfriend? Have I met her?"

"You liked her, remember?"

"Your father will be home soon."

"Mum? Why don't you come have some dinner?"

"I'm waiting for your father, Peter. We don't start without

him. I hope you've done your homework."

"I have, mum."

"Good boy".

So proud. He could be a pilot. Brett says I'm too old. And I'm a good mother. Ashy needs me. Peter needs me. Don't want anyone to say I'm selfish. Daddy says I'm selfish, won't wait my turn. Johnny goes first, that's the way it is.

"But I'm older!"

Daddy looks at me. Mama's quiet.

Pain.

Smack, smack, smack.

"You have to say you're sorry". Mama knows what's best. "Don't be ungrateful. You're a very lucky girl, not like I was". Mama knows what's best. Do what mama says. Say the words and do the things. Make daddy happy again. Be a pilot.

Don't like making him happy.

Such a pretty sky.

Daddy stands, makes me scared, walks inside. Better when he ignores.

I wish Johnny still were here. So unfair.

"You don't understand." Mama's voice inside. "She's not getting better. You can't stop it." Is that Johnny's girlfriend? "Just cause you're too scared, Peter!"

"What are we supposed to do? Stick her in that place you found? So you don't have to deal with it anymore?"

"Grow up, Peter!" So angry. My fault mama's angry. "You think this is easy? You think I want to put her in there? Why don't you take her and see how you go? Tell me what it's like waiting around watching her die".

Sad, funerals. Poor Johnny. Pretty sky for Johnny, getting dark. Still a bit of time to play. Zoom around the backyard. Not long. Maybe Johnny's waiting.

"Ashley! Keep your voice down." Don't listen, Ashy. Be a pilot. "It's just a rough patch. She's just waiting there, that's all".

"Don't you get it, Peter? It's the same night, every time. She's not just waiting for him. She's waiting for him *that night*".

Waiting, waiting, waiting. She'll be home soon. High school. No more dirty backyard dresses. Have to say it's still ok, so she knows. Wish she'd play outside again, like she did when she was young, with Peter. Mama's wrong. I want to play with Johnny, I like getting dirty. It's just a dress.

Daddy likes pretty dresses.

"Mum?" Ashy sits beside me.

"You can't keep waiting, Ashy. Have to make a choice."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb, Ashley, this is serious."

"I know, mum."
"You should study, Ashy, I want you to study."
"What?"
"Don't be scared."
"I'm not scared."
"Good."
"Mum?" Might not come home. Hate the force, wish he'd leave. Always worried. "Mum, I finished, remember? Remember my grad?"
"I'm proud of you. Wait until your father hears."
"Mum, why are you waiting? Come inside. Please."
"You're so impatient. Need to learn to wait."
"Are you sure? That sounds like something grandma would say."
"No, I don't want to be a grandma for a long time, Ashy. You should wait."
Quiet. Old car turns down street, goes towards pretty sky. Fades away. New one passes, headlights on, comes closer bit by bit.
"I start next week."
"I know, sweetie. Proud of you. Have you told uncle Johnny yet? He'll be so happy. He thinks I should go study, I don't think mama would like that."
"But..." And she sighs. "I'm sure he would be. Mum, my job. The hospital, remember?"
"I don't like them. When's your graduation?"
Ashy's face is angry. Don't like her when she's angry. Not right. Need to smile, make people happy. "What's wrong, sweetie?"
Looks away, towards the sky. "Why don't you come inside, mum?"
Is that him? No. Should be home, soon. All those uniforms. Sad faces. Wish he'd leave the force. Always makes me worried. "Have you done your homework, Ashy? Your father will be home soon."
"Mum, he's not... come inside. Please."
Wish Johnny still were here.
"When are you getting married, Ashy?"
"What?"
"You need to settle down."
Such a worried face. I know why mama's worried. Mama knows.
"Mum, what are you talking about?"
"A man, Ashy, you can't keep waiting, you're getting older".
"Are you ok, mum?" Still sore. Mama says I shouldn't fight. Waiting's better. Wait and dream, be a pilot. "Mum? What's wrong?"
"Waiting for your father, Ashy."
Warm hands, always warm, Ashy's hands. "Mum, come inside."
"He won't be too much longer."
"I made plum chicken. Come have some."
"Daddy's not home yet."
"It's ok, we can start without him."
"No, we have to wait."
"Come on, mum." Grabs my hand. Ow. "Come inside."
Pull away. "Stop it. Don't touch me."

"Mum!"
Nurse yanks, such a disapproving face. Judging. Knows what I've been up to. Sorry, mama. Can't keep waiting, don't want to stay, get up, get up, try to get up. Struggle. Hear the door. Men.
"Help me!" nurse yells. "Get her inside."
Struggle. Rough hands, power, pressing down, a man, a stranger, strange faces, won't let me stand. Scream.
Help me, mama.
Waiting. Just wait. Dream. Be a pilot.
Zoom around the backyard.
Such a pretty sky.

There's a woman in the next seat. Moaning. One of those long, drawn out sounds that could be happy memory, or desolation, or pain. Who knows? I see her every time, always in that chair. Always moaning, always ignored. I saw her eyes, once, and I wondered if there was something still there, something inside. But I try not to see the eyes. I can look at mum, but not her eyes. It's too hard.

Try to connect. Try not to at the same time.

"Pilot", mum says. She always liked the sky. Even now, every time I visit, there she is, in her spot right next to the window. "Pilot," she repeats. It's one of the few words she has anymore. I wish I knew why.

Sun's beginning to set. "Did you like the sky today?"

And she looks at me. But not really at me. You can't ever tell what she sees. "Johnny."

"Oh yeah? What about Johnny?" I wait, and I wait, but no response will come. She just looks back at the sky, sadness spreading over her face. It would have been nice to see him again. Such a long time ago, all that was.

"Are you ready for dinner, mum?"

Wheel her to the dining table, tuck her under, just the right height. Here they come, one by one – the evening rush. The sticks and wheels and walkers. You need some cruel humour in a place like this. I touch her hand. I'll never know what's going on inside.

"Ashy."

The word sends a thrill down my spine. Like always, a jolt, a momentary hope of recognition, but the moment fades to disappointed realisation. She doesn't really know.

"Pilot."

"That's right, mum. I'm a pilot. Just like you wanted".

No smile, nothing. I just touch her hand again. There's a movement, ever so tiny, her own finger barely moving against my own. Like it's resting.

No, it means nothing. The mind plays tricks on you, here. Creates things that don't exist. Except that they did, once, a long time ago. All the years and memories this place would hold if those memories still existed. Surrounded by arched backs and sagging faces, and by my side is mum, the youngest face in the room. Sitting at the table. Waiting for her turn.

Always waiting.

Author

Alexander Forbes is an Honours graduate of the University of the Sunshine Coast Creative Writing program. He is currently completing a Master of Applied Linguistics at the University of New England, analysing the discourses and lexical semantics of mental health terms using Natural Semantic Metalanguage.

Copyright of Social Alternatives is the property of Social Alternatives and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.