

Extract from:

Acid Song
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Saturday
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THE FUTURE WAS about to split in two. Either Robyn's father would bring up politics, or he wouldn't. If he didn't then neither would they and the lunch would be bearable. Long and unpleasant, in the way that eating Robyn's muesli each morning was long and unpleasant – but bearable. But if politics was mentioned there was the chance of somebody saying something honest, something they would regret. Visiting on election day was a mistake. They should have thought of an excuse. Luke eased his car into the driveway taking great care to slow, lest he disturb the gravel. Something to do with the mower, the foolish red ride-on his mother-in-law used to make stripes of the grass.

'Darling!' Ruth stopped at the border of the lawn and knelt so that Alicia could run to her outstretched arms.

'Hi Mum.' Robyn smiled. She relaxed around her parents, just as surely as Luke tensed. He knew they considered him the uptight one.

'Garden's looking nice,' Luke offered. Ruth, entranced by Alicia counting on her stubby fingers, did not hear him.

The clouds opened, hurrying them into the house. Nigel waited at the drinks' cabinet.

'Robyn, Luke, lovely. Have a drink.'

Nigel was a tall man, generous in his formality. Charming and entertaining to friends, dismissive of humanity's remainder. Luke orbited on the boundary, held in place by the fierce gravity of family.

Nigel cast his eyes around in search of his first and forever favourite granddaughter, but the little traitor had scurried through into the next room in pursuit of Lindt, the huge chocolate ball of feline fluff for whom she would surely give her life. Nigel dressed for Saturday dinners with a country club formality: a navy blazer over a carefully pressed shirt chosen by Ruth, who had an eye for these things. His shoes were freshly polished, a quiet reprimand to the slovenly. The smugness of a heat pump made it too warm for Luke's sweatshirt but he did not trust the T-shirt beneath. How disappointed they must have been, when Robyn first brought him home.

'So, have you voted yet?'

'I can only speak for myself,' Luke replied, trying, as he always did with Nigel, to ingratiate himself by making light of things. And failing, as always. Nigel leaned in and down, confused.

'He's joking,' Robyn explained.

'Oh.'

'I just meant, we both voted, but not together,' Luke added, more afraid of the silence than his further butchering of the conversation.

'You went to different polling booths?'

'No, I just meant ...' Nothing. He meant nothing. The sort of nothing other people let pass with a smile. 'That we didn't vote together. We didn't cast the same votes.'

'You voted for different parties?'

From the kitchen ancient smells of slaughter wafted through the house.

‘No. I don’t know. Maybe. We don’t know. We don’t discuss it. We vote individually you see. That’s what I meant.’

Robyn was embarrassed for him, Luke saw it in the way she looked to the painting behind her father’s head. If Robyn followed her mother into the kitchen, Luke decided, he would divorce her.

Nigel had a long obtrusive nose which dominated his every expression. He looked down it now, a marksman sighting along his barrel.

‘So you both vote for different parties?’

‘I don’t know,’ Luke said.

‘Well it’s not hard to find out,’ Nigel told them. ‘Who did you vote for?’

‘I thought that was meant to be private,’ Luke tried.

‘We’re family.’ This was Nigel’s favourite, and possibly only, debating technique. Single statements, often factual, mostly irrefutable and rarely linked to the topic at hand, forced upon the world like a cork upon a bottle: the final word.

Silence followed. Luke received a Scotch, which he detested, and Robyn a lemonade, because of the baby. They knew of course. Had done for over a fortnight. Nigel waited for the answer. Ruth emerged from the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron.

‘Almost there, just finishing off the gravy.’ She smiled at them and made for the drinks’ cabinet.

‘I thought you had one,’ Nigel reprimanded.

‘Put my glass down somewhere,’ she told him.

‘Where?’

‘In the dishwasher. Now pour me another or move.’ She swatted Nigel aside. Luke could like Ruth. She was the only person in the room who he was sure didn’t consider him a failure.

‘We’ve voted the same way every election since we married haven’t we dear?’ Nigel announced as he monitored the level of his wife’s glass.

‘That’s right,’ Ruth agreed. ‘Always have.’

‘That’s what she tells you anyway,’ Luke tried. Nigel ignored him.

‘National. Both of us. Eleven elections in a row now.’

‘That’s remarkable,’ Luke said. Later he would blame the drink, but he could have floated to this point on water alone.

‘It is,’ Nigel agreed.

‘Thirty-three years, and every time the same party puts up the best candidates and the best policy options. What are the odds of that happening, just by chance, would you say?’

Nigel sensed he was being criticised, but that was secondary. They were talking politics, as he had no doubt been looking forward to all morning. It enlivened him, just as later it would make him angry. Politics in the end was the art of the inevitable.