

Acton

Sigrid Hendriksen

His face was a maelstrom of angles. All sharp peaks and troughs. Even his name carried the metallic splice of a blade. Almost comical. Acton. He wondered what desertion of sense had procured him such a vindictive title. Some form of post-birth euphoria no doubt. He could see them now — eyes manic, mouths twisted garishly, idiotically impressed by their own audacity — Acton! Acton!

As though among the blood and shit and sweat they had resorted to a shared and infantile glee. A childish yearning of sorts. Expulsion of responsibility perhaps. After all he was the result, the accident, of one spurring night of passion, heat and thrashing limbs in the midst of a baking December, crickets droning lugubriously in the backdrop. Like a parody of some seedy American film, Acton was conceived in the musty exterior of his father's beat-up ute, beneath the trappings of a lurid half-moon and winking coins of light. Even after years of possession, it still rolled funny across his tongue. Acton. Harked of something other-worldly. He felt anything but.

He had been brought up as jagged as his name. A world cold and oppressive, drenched in neglect, interspersed only with the violent flurrying bursts of a father's fists. It isolated him from the others, with their butternut hair and smiles like tangerine sunsets. From youth he sought solitude. Used to sneak down to the beach on summer nights — torch in hand, salty breeze clipping at his heels. Floating on his back he would watch the stars, as curtains of froth and indigo pitched him out to sea. In the turbulence of

churning water he always found a kind of peace. At home he felt he was only content sheltered under the vast expanse of hanging foliage in the cottage garden. Peered contentedly from behind the canopy, a silent observer of the triviality of everyday life. Low to the ground, not unlike a prowling cat, he watched his mother potter around the yard, timidly and unsuccessfully twisting at the blooming weeds that choked the flowerbeds. Little brown eyes blazing — he felt god-like in the gloom. He could sense his father's presence within the house, brooding and stifling, like a summer storm.

He sometimes thought that if he just lay quietly he could feel it. It was almost a noise. That something unbidden brooding beneath his chest, stirring and seething in his veins. Pulsating grotesquely beneath the paper-thin ivory of innocent skin. His father saw it. Said he was different, that he might not see it now, but around the time his voice dived to low gravel, he would know too. He was different. Something in the way he talked, or the way he saw things, was fundamentally wrong. The kids at school seemed to know too. They were privy to his blemish. To the grainy spots he tried so vainly to conceal. His futile attempts to bend to conformity earned him a constant barrage of mockery. "A leopard can't change his spots" they would tell him, eyes riddled with laughter. Still he loitered in all the known places, cigarette dangling foolishly between quivering lips. Fixed his expression to one of nonchalance and wolf-whistled at the passing girls with fervour. All the while steeling himself from what he knew to be true. It was all a lie.

His grandmother came to stay that summer. His father, in a rare fit of expression, proclaimed she was a rainbow personified — a spinning mandala of smooth yellows, lush greens, fiery reds and icy mountain blues. She was a beanstalk of a woman; scrappy limbs sprouting from a lean, wiry torso. She was brilliant, but confused. Acton's mother called her eccentric — didn't like to tempt fate and categorically peg her as "insane" or "deranged". She resided in the bungalow out back, built by his father in a feverish burst of sweat and profanity. It was a marvellous

contraption — crafted with candid absurdity. Long shafts of weatherboard littered with nails and a pile of layered bricks for steps. It leant precariously to the left as though it was a wrecked ship sinking in the bog — the hard, parched, summer earth could no more have swallowed that monstrosity than produce a stunning array of flora. Still, she was happy there. Set out her easel and lined the windowsill with pots of coloured paint. She terrified Acton. To him she seemed an unearthly being. When he stood before her, he felt twisted and exposed. As though his organs hung outside his body. On arrival she had crooked her finger and leant in close as though sharing something clandestine and profound. “I see you” she had whispered, her voice rasping, as though there were spider webs strung across her throat. Acton bit his cheek, a moist pocket of flesh. Could taste metal in his mouth.



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