

Bygones

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'Bygones' takes an interest in the way that processes of association inform our experience of sexuality. As it unpicks fragments from the past, the narrative enacts a present that is infiltrated by the triggers and channels of remembering. A hen party sex quiz leads to memories of times bygone and yet omnipresent.

Annie's memories are triggered by verbal cues in the present – moments *outside the square... bad eggs... quirky sex*. Annie recalls experiences from the past – *shower tiles, smooth and wet... fresh bleach... spider furballs in her throat*. Through the interaction between past and present, the narrative contemplates the impact of formative sexual experiences. This contemplation takes place in the context of a first-person style of narration. This realm is necessarily idiosyncratic and "speech-like," riddled by Annie's ideological and epistemological outlook.

For Annie, past and present are connected via a web of associations. In this way, the remembering consciousness forms associations intuitively. The term similarity "does not mean to the subconscious what it means to conscious reasoning [...] the subconscious [...] considers similarity identical with identity" (Mavromatis 1987: 178). For Annie, the act of remembering is emotional and associative rather than logical.

Form and content merge as the narrative foregrounds processes of association. Signs in the surface content of the narrative are connected associatively – claustrophobic echoes and thick silence, bygone memories. This movement mimics the associative ties between present and past in Annie's consciousness.

Mavromatis, A. 1987. *Hypnagogia. The Unique State of Consciousness Between Wakefulness and Sleep*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

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Gen says, "Charge your glasses Ladies. It's time for The Sex Quiz."

She says it like a glitzy compère from the telly and I start panicking. I don't want to play. These girls are my oldest friends, they're the fountain of my youth, but they're bygone, like my dreams.

I excuse myself and nick off to the toilet. I feel like my old mates are analysing every move I make. *Relax*, I tell myself. *Just play the game; it's only one night*. I am freaking out that I'll unravel and they'll find out all the shabby details of my life. *Stay calm*, I tell myself. *They don't know anything*.

We are away for a Hen's weekend. Another one found the perfect man. I shouldn't have come but I wanted to see them. I thought I missed them but it was only the dreams, the fountain of dreams. I thought the dreams would be here with the friends, barnacled to them, but I was wrong and I have barnacles of my own, leeching on to me like love. Love's no picnic, don't kid yourself, love's no dream.

I shouldn't have come. I'm edgy about the sex quiz. What will I say? For me, sex is a routine; it's like brushing my teeth. I fuck shiteheads and wish they weren't shiteheads, but I fuck them because I know they're shiteheads and shiteheads are what I know. I hope that, at least they'll be a good hard root, and console myself that, at least with these arseholes, I don't have to pretend life is pretty.

I fuck them like there's no tomorrow, like they're all I've ever wanted, so they'll remember me like I'm their first and only. They'll remember me all

right because, for a spell, I'm too good to be true. Putting out like there's no tomorrow, I'm a dream come true.

Gen says, "Stand up if you've taken it up the arse."

There's mixed laughter around the table. Gen sits with her glasses poised on the end of her nose, holding the page of questions in one hand and a pen in the other. I ash my ciggie. I wait and see who's going to stand. Half of the girls around the table rise out of their chairs, five out of ten women, so I stand too.

We're not girls anymore. The wear and tear is beginning to show, especially around the eyes and the forehead. You can tell who has time and money for a bit of pampering.

"Interesting odds," says Debbie, scanning the table. "I thought it would be higher than fifty per cent, with all you young ones."

I don't know Debbie: husky-voice, big boobs. I imagine I might have been a bit like her if my life had been happier. Her wrinkles are all smile lines, ingrained. I'm glad these other women are here too, Kel's friends from her new life, otherwise it would be too up-close-and-personal. I wouldn't be able to breathe.

I tell myself to relax. It's just a game, all for a laugh. It's surface stuff, doesn't mean I have to tell them how things really are.

"Someone has to tell the tale, that's the rule. If no one offers to tell, we vote."

Gen scans the table, peering at us over the top of her mauve, metallic glasses. There's no need to vote because Kel starts telling.

"That's all he wanted to do," she said. "It was all he could talk about at dinner, checking if I'd baulk at it. I nodded along like he was talking about the wine, like I'd done it a million times," she laughed. "He was hot – buffed. Makes you wonder though; I might have been a fella for the interest he showed in anything else."

She sips her champagne slowly. She has our attention. "He had really bad breath," she laughs "so it was a relief not to be face to face."

My memory shifts to the grime of my life, to the repeated struggle to start each day fresh, knowing that there's nothing fresh about it, knowing all the while that it's the same old, same old.

I'm a cleaner. It's hard, physical labour: floors and bathrooms, bending and sweating, making things look new and sparkly, kidding myself that there's something lasting, something good. My body is in pretty good shape. I'm slim and strong, skinny and tanned. I love a bit of sun. My exercise is my work because my life is non-recreational. I love a fag but I'm young so I'm not weathered by it. I look healthy enough on the outside. I have a few fine lines around my eyes, like smile lines, except they're from the disappointment. Forget the weather and the smokes, it's disappointment that gives you the lines.

Kel starts talking about the good old days, jumping from story to story, but tying it all together somehow. I have no idea how she remembers. Where I come from the past is over — you don't dredge it up. Kel is openly emotional; of course she is, her secrets are clean. She wears her clean secrets on her sleeve. She lets it all hang out and everyone loves her. Who else would have got us all back together for the sake of a wedding?

I haven't seen these girls for ten years. Jill is in my face straight away. She asks about my life. She wants to know if I'm happy, centred. She can't even wait until I've had a couple of beers. Jill was my best friend in the old days, when the world was awash with dreams.

I don't know what I was thinking coming back here. As if I'm going to tell Miss-Perfect-Life that I get fucked up the arse every day, from every direction, that I fuck myself up the arse most days. I don't owe her anything. She's as dried up as my dreams.

I stand, hunched over the balcony, staring at the still water, only a few ripples, and I think about home — my stretch of beach. I imagine these old school friends with my new crowd. My beach people are rough around the edges but they don't miss a trick. They know that good mothering is nothing but a luxury.

Gen says, "Stand up if you've had intimate sexual relations with another woman, even a kiss."

I laugh on cue, stay busy with my ciggie. A few of the girls stand. Renee

asks Kel if she's standing because of the time she pashed Emily; that was a scandal when we were fifteen. Emily is a full-blown lezzo now, a dead set carpet-muncher, as the beach crew would say.

"She was a great kisser," says Kel, shrugging it off and laughing; so happy in her own skin that nothing can touch her and everyone wants to. She's like the coins for the wishes, twinkling under the fountain, sparkling with promise as if hopes and dreams were something. But the sparkling is a fucked-up fantasy; the water is recycled, putrid at the heart of itself, freshened up with a bit of chlorine bleach.

The girls get talking about Emily; long bronze legs, blonde hair, sickeningly straight and shiny, all the guys were dying for her. We wonder about it a minute or so, laugh about what's become of us all. I put out a laugh. It comes back to haunt me like an echo. That's what the bygone is, after all, a claustrophobic echo.

Kel tops up the drinks. I think about my beach people. There's no interrogation where I'm from. The tide washes in and we forget about yesterday. It's the land of no regrets. If you're not having a holiday and you're not settled into some sort of polished family life, then you're running away from something.

I ran away from my family. I was sixteen. It was summertime, tourist time, plenty of work around. After five years, I had Teddy. When he was born, I rang Mum and Dad. I was going to tell them about my new baby boy but Mum launched in first. She said, "Your brother is dead." I could hear wet static, crying and spitting through clenched teeth. "You have destroyed this family because you wouldn't let it be BYGONE." The midwife was in the room so I made out like I got the answering machine. I stammered something about calling back later and I hung up. That's the last time I cried for echoes.

"I'll make you a cup of tea," said the midwife. "It's overwhelming, this wee baby and the torrent of hormones. Have a cup of tea, Honey, and then I'll help you with a shower."

I ditched the shift-work after Teddy was born. I put a sign in the window of the grocery store: *House Cleaning. Reasonable Rates.* I figured I was cleaning up my life. There are degrees of cleanliness, of course, depends how you look at it. But don't worry about the grime. The tide will wash in tomorrow and clean the slate. That is the paradise of the seaside: bygones are bygones.

When I clean the beach houses, I take Teddy along. I watch him jump on their trampolines and ride their bikes. I sip imported tea and watch him through the kitchen window. It's like being on a holiday because it's new. But there's no fun. It's a fun-less holiday.

When you're in someone else's empty house, the bygones come haunting. It's all dust and bitterness, bathroom scum and bygone possibilities. I work double time, sweating and puffing, harder, faster, until I'm too fucked to think, lightheaded from the bleach.

On the way home, I lean down and kiss Teddy on the head. I pretend the beach is just a phase and soon I'll go back to the city, back to the world of fountains and dreams where I really belong. But I belong here, of course, because dreams are just maybes and belonging is just making do.

My beach people don't give a flying fuck about your problems or if they do, they have too much on their own plate to worry about it (but don't kid yourself they don't know – they know alright).

My beach people lack the shifts of emotion that wash across normal people's faces. Their expressions disappear before you can read them, coming and going like the ripples on the water. It makes it hard to see what lies beneath, but you don't want to see anyway because it's not sparkly, there's fuck all promise.

At the beach, you can bury your regrets and be done with it – dig them in under the sand or throw them to the gulls – the tide will wash in and out, no one will ever know. At the beach, everyone just wants to move on. There's no time for dreams and intimacy is irrelevant.

C'mon Doll, give us a smile, eh. Put on some lippy and a nice pair a' shoes. Good as new; there y'are Doll. I've got some powder will cover that. Take a coupla' these anti-inflammatory numbers, wash 'em down with your wine, a good long sip. There y'are. See? Now have a fag, it'll help with the breathing, nice and slow, in and out. Men are cunts, Doll.

If the tide takes too long to wash in, we turn to the grog. Alcohol is the root of all evil and all that. *Cheers!* That's our seaside sense of humour. We laugh whenever we can and nothing lasts until tomorrow. Nothing is all that funny but we laugh a lot and tomorrow has no memory.

I don't get to the pub much these days because I have Teddy, so I don't really see anyone. I miss the laughs because empty laughing is better than nothing. Teddy and I just potter around at home or go cleaning. I think about all the things I want to give him. If I didn't love him and I didn't know him and I didn't need him, I should have got rid of him. But I was afraid. Abortions make the silence so thick.

Jill passes her wallet around, bursting with snaps of her shiny, happy family, yanking me back into the moment. I have a quick look and murmur approvingly. I've seen her husband before. I know him from somewhere. It can't be from the wedding because I wasn't invited.

Jill doesn't look as though she's had one baby, let alone two. That's what you get when life is full of pleasure: off to the gym, then a facial, top it off with a low-carb lunch and a skinny soy latte. Jill probably has someone like me cleaning her house and then someone else (with a better education and more reputable qualifications) to look after the kids. I excuse myself, head back to the toilet.

I sit there awhile, resting my head against the wall. I shouldn't have come. I'll make an excuse about Teddy: a fall, a sudden illness. I'll go home first thing in the morning.

I grab another stubbie on my way back out to the table, hoping the sexual quiz is over soon. Actually I hope it goes on all night because it blanks out the opportunity for any real conversation.

I down half the beer, accept a glass of wine. Line 'em up girls, that's the way, so I can numb the fuck up. Where I come from, no one needs to know too much and I have my aloneness. No one minds me and that's the way I like it.

Gen says, "Stand up if you've done quirky sex, bondage, cross-dressing, anything outside the square."

I watch Jill. Her sister, Gabby, was right into it. Jill wouldn't realise that I know; maybe she doesn't know. I met Gabby in a different crowd, a friend of a friend, just after I moved down the beach. I wonder what she was running

away from. Gabby brought some strange men along to our gatherings. Odd fetishes. Hooks. Loads of money.

Jill stares at me. I don't stand up. She knows I'm lying; she can always tell. Maybe I should tell the truth. I've done bondage, whoop-de-do. Tie me up and hurt me, get off on your own power, grip my wind-pipe so you can make me come harder – whoop-de-fuckin'-do-da-day – it's skin level.

They don't want the real truth.

The real truth: I'm a slave to every ugly mistake I've made and I make them again and again, every day. Sometimes a mistake is the best I can do, that's bondage, shackles are nothing. At least I choose (who I screw, when I come). I'm a fabulous pretender. You'll think I've come like a steam train. Truth is I can hold off for hours. Coming is a state of mind and I avoid the intimacy. I prefer to come alone.

Gen says, "C'mon girls," surprising me and standing. "You can't tell me that no one else... "

Sarah stands. "He was a strange bird, that's all I'm saying. A bad egg."

Jill is staring at me. Everyone is looking at me. I stand because the 'bad egg' threw me. I'm a great liar, a professional, but today I'm tripping myself up and I can't get the air in. I can barely move and I can't speak. They're under my skin, piercing, like the hooks.

They're all staring at me. Everyone. Are they staring at me because I'm going red, or am I going red because they're staring at me? I stand, sucking the smoke down hard. I look up at the sky and exhale, blowing the smoke up and away at the stars. It's a clear night, clear as a bell, whatever that means, clear as a wedding bell. I wander over to the edge of the verandah and watch the moon on the water. I wonder if the view would look the same if my life were different.

"Someone has to tell," says Gen. "I choose Annie."

Why me for this one? Why fucking me? I don't say anything but then the vote comes in and I'm on.

"I'm busting," I say, shifting my weight from foot to foot like I really need to go.

"C'mon Annie, I told my secrets," says Kel.

"Yeah, c'mon," says Renee.

The girls are all staring at me – waiting, waiting. My voice becomes a whisper.

"I was thinking of something else," I stutter, "somewhere else."

Bad egg. Bad egg.

When my brother was mean to me, that's what Dad would say, "He's a bad egg Annie, an absolute asshole." Mum said, "He's outside the square, that's all." For years I thought that meant the same thing. I thought that 'inside the square' were all the nice people, the normal people, and 'outside the square' were all the strange birds, the bad eggs.

The girls are all staring at me and I squirm. I should tell a bondage story – I have a million. It's mind over matter, mostly, and I couldn't give a fuck if the whole world knows. Tie me up with my legs wide, film it if you want, I couldn't care less... And that's when I remember Jill's husband. Mr Cash. Does she know about his life outside the square? Playing hooky with her sister.

Jill is staring me down. I look at my hands momentarily, drawing desperately on my ciggie. I need a way out. I take a punt that she knows something.

"Ask Jill about Gabby," I say, desperate to deflect, to accuse, desperate to get everyone off me.

All my old school friends know Gabby. She's three years older than us. She used to buy our booze, back in the day. Everyone is quiet, staring at Jill, then at me. I run to the toilet.

Jill's sister Gabby is dead. She overdosed when she came back to Melbourne. They don't know whether it was an accident or on purpose, hard to tell. My best bet, the fountain of dreams killed her. I didn't know that she was dead, of course. Gen told me later.

I sit on the closed lid of the toilet with my head in my hands, breathing too quickly. Why did I stand for that one? Because I thought they could see that I was lying. How could they have seen? They couldn't have, they're drowning in the reality of their own dreams.

The paranoia is making me act out of my own skin and nothing seems real. I stay there, on the toilet, off my head with the panic, dreading exposure. I know that when I go out, they'll want more. You can't rewind time with

these people. They hang on to everything with their clear heads and their untangled consciences, leeching on to other people's mess. Vultures. They don't know bygones.

When the bad egg appeared at the bathroom door, I was wearing my shitty old pyjamas and my saggy, bleach-blotched undies. The bathroom and the toilet were my responsibility when I lived at home. I always cleaned them on Saturday mornings.

He was my biggest secret. I kept him at the front of my mind so I remembered that I could never tell anyone about him. But with these old friends I felt like I was wearing my secrets on my sleeve, except that I was sleeveless so they were crawling on my skin. Under.

I didn't hear him come in. I was cleaning the shower, the water was trickling and I was scrubbing. "I'm nearly done," I said nervously, catching sight of him perched in the doorway, all arms and legs and a small head, like a spider. "I have a boyfriend," I said desperately as he was unzipping. "You don't have a boyfriend," he said smirking. His left eye twitched. It always twitched when he was about to do something mean.

I was reeling in bleach and shock, coughing and spluttering. I knew that he wasn't right in the head but I never imagined...

I should have known. I was naïve. He was rough – brutal – there's your S and M. He left without saying a word. I used my old undies to clean myself up. Bleach, bleach, burning-bleach.

I couldn't believe it. Neither could Mum. She said it never happened. She organised the abortion but she said it never happened. A year later, I moved out. I up and left in the middle of the day. It might seem like a sideways move, the bygone beach, but it was more of a diagonal. I choose – ME – I choose who I fuck, I choose when I come. My rules – nothing sideways about that.

I flush the toilet and take a few deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, preparing to face the girls. Jill is in the far corner of the verandah, stooped over the railing, talking quietly to Fran. They're tight those two, with their middle-class blouses and casual diamonds. Fran didn't really hang out with us at school. I thought she was boring. We all thought she was boring.

I sit down and light a ciggie. I shake the packet, only two left. That'll be my excuse for a walk. I'll go on a ciggie run, over to the corner pub. I'll have a beer with the locals, maybe a game of pool. There'll be beach-people in the public bar so it'll be safe and anonymous. It'll be like home – this is only the other side of the bay after all.

The conversation has become stilted. Everyone is pretty pissed now (except Debbie because she's pregnant). It's quiet. The group has broken into groups; the fun has splintered into grief. The stillness is fully loaded. It's about to come all over itself. Like the fountain of dreams.

"Spill the beans Annie," slurs Kel.

"It was nothing," I say, wracking my mind full of ugly truths, trying to sift something believable and normal out of the wrongness...haunted by his busy spider legs, the pinned down pinching. "It was when I f-first moved down there," I say.

I can't think straight. Echoes of echoes. I'm stuttering, speaking too fast. I'm red in the face and I don't know what I'm going to say next but I know that I have to keep talking. Everyone is quiet, listening, waiting. Kel is giggling all the while but she's off her face. She polished off half a dozen stubbies before we arrived, and that was hours ago now.

"C'mon Annie," begs Kel.

"He was dressed...like a spider," I blurt.

What am I doing? I should have made it all lies. Now I've snookered myself, putting lies next to the truth, and I feel like a dodgy drama student. I'm not pulling it off and everyone is watching me. I laugh nervously. I sound like I'm going to cry.

I remember the shower tiles against my cheek, cold and smooth, wet. Inhale, burning, fresh bleach. Exhale, wheezing, spider furballs in my throat.

"The floor was wet. I slipped over," I say.

Fran says, "Slipped where?"

At school she was boring, a nervous Nelly. She would never have asked me a direct question. Now she's a nosy, pompous, lawyer, fuck. I could give her the heads up about sex and everything that goes with it. We think we're all so different but I'm telling you, once you take off the suit and the watch,

and wriggle out of the expensive undies, it's all a muchness.

I could tell the truth. That would shut them up. I'm a cleaner, sometimes there's sex as well. It's easy money and honest enough, from my end anyway. It's not hard. Triple the money for a quick screw, same for a blow. If there's going to be sex, the wife and kids are back in town and the man is waiting around when I come to clean the beach house. That's generally the way of it, I've found; underground, more or less, I had no idea. The man loiters around and the expectation lurks in the air like his wife's perfume, not long gone but bygone and suffocating.

It's easy enough if you know how to read people and, like I said, I know how to fuck like there's no tomorrow, like there's only tomorrow. If I don't like them, I don't go back. Let them explain to their silky-skinned wives why there's been a fall-out with the cleaning lady.

Sex has nothing to do with class, you see. Once you're in the thick of it, you can be anyone. The power is in the act. The expensive aftershave gets riddled with good hard-working sweat and there's nowhere to hide, except in your mind. No one gives a shit about your limp six-figure package. It's a slimy bygone in a fountain of pond scum.

"*Slipped where?*" Fran drills me like I'm in the courtroom, under oath, her witness.

"Oh... over the scales," I say. "I banged my head, lost consciousness for a second."

"You poor darling," says Deb. "That's an awful story. What happened when you came to? Did you need stitches?"

"No-no. It was nothing. Just a... *bad egg*."

The girls glance at each other. Fran raises an eyebrow.

"I'm frightened of spiders," I cry desperately.

"What?" Fran narrows her eyes at me.

"How long ago was this?"

Jill likes to know everything, all the petty detail. She has a memory like an elephant, big and fat and grey. That's why I moved away from these people.

"It was...a long time ago," I say, pushing my ciggie hard into the ashtray, savouring the burn.

I blow smoke out the side of my mouth like a lie, dust the soot from my fingertips. I sip my wine and then I down it, help myself to another.

Jill asks, "Was this before you had Teddy?"

If only I'd waited, just a second or two. If only I'd realised that she'd moved on from me. She didn't believe my story and she was pulling the rug out from under, but she didn't really expect me to answer, she was just putting it out there.

I say, "Why do you always cross-fucking-examine me?"

"What?" says Jill, stunned into sobriety. "I haven't seen you for years. We barely talk. You make up lies that don't make sense."

"What do you want me to say Jill? You think you're so fucking superior, with your perfect house and your cashed up—"

"Stop it Annie. Don't say another word," says Fran.

I splutter, "Why did you ask me to come, so you can interrogate me, ridicule me? You can all GET FUCKED."

I grab hold of an empty stubbie, raise it to shoulder height. Kel stands suddenly, crying and staggering. She pushes her chair back clumsily and the leg screeches against the sandstone tiles. It sounds like a crying fox, warping time like an echo. Kel places one hand on my cocked shoulder, the other on the back of my chair.

"I wanted us all here," she says. "I wanted all the Rockets back together again." She laughs, swaying from side to side like she's on a boat. "Remember us on the oval, smoking it up behind the trees?"

"I don't remember," I say.

Gen says, "WHAT?"

"It's Bygone," I say firmly.

"You could remember," says Fran. "If..."

1. Maybe I shouldn't have thrown a stubbie at Fran. She needed four stitches and they shaved her eyebrow to repair the cut properly (being such a jagged wound and all).

2. Maybe I should've told the girls the truth about the rape. Then they

wouldn't think I was a bitch, as well as a loser. But misperception is part of life, just got to wear it hey, and maybes are like bygones, they're just fucking nothing.

3. Maybe Mum was right on the abortion front. No one wants to grow up knowing they are the product of a rape and so I slept on it, again and again, until I didn't know if it was real, until I wasn't sure if it ever really happened, until it was a baby in a bucket bygone.

4. They called the wedding off, so maybe he wasn't all he was cracked up to be, but not many of them are when you get down to the flesh. Erections are a temporary matter.

5. Or maybe the wedding went ahead and they thought it best not to invite me, because of the fiasco with the stubbie. Fran has a nasty scar and I don't fit in anymore, so paranoid, a bit rough really. No offence but things change, different neck of the woods and all that.

6. Things change and they don't. They're the same and they're not. But not to worry, it all comes out in the fountainous wash. Except bleach and bad memories. They fuck you for life.