

My Lover's Eyes

BY EVELYN TSITAS

The endless simulacrum of outer suburbs unfolded into an expanse of brown landscape. It was a brutal reminder that despite intermittent rain during winter, Australia was in the grip of a long drought. Not that it meant much in Fitzroy, where I didn't even have a pot plant to nurture and the only greenery I encountered was the wilted kale on sourdough at the local cafe. Now I could see that life was drying up around me. I had been born in Melbourne, but I'd rarely stepped outside the city. I could have been visiting another country. Everything was so foreign to me.

My mind drifted as I took in the modern farmhouses with their swing sets and family vans in the driveway; the tight groupings of cows close to their babies. Evidence of nature's fecundity taunted me. I busied myself by taking notes on colors, thinking that Sidney Nolan had got it right. Ochre. The stark white of cockatoos sweeping into the big blue sky. The full cliché of the Australian bush.

We drove for hours. Howard didn't like to stop for breaks. My eyes grew heavy and as I was falling asleep, something came crashing down on the windscreen. The car swerved violently.

"Bloody hell!" said Howard.

The sudden impact of a black crow on the windscreen pushed the car sideways. I screamed as a truck coming down the next lane flashed its

headlights. The bird's head was forced backwards and blood splattered the glass. Its lifeless eyes reflected the sun. In an instant, I was back in the limousine, with Lawrence beside me. My uterus went into a painful spasm as my body imagined the accident was happening all over again. I could taste the blood in my mouth. I could feel the blood between my legs.

"We're going to die!" I screamed. I gripped the seat, anticipating a collision.

But Howard pulled the wheel hard and wrenched it from its path towards the truck and brought us back onto the right side of the road.

We drove in silence.

"You okay?" he said at last.

Instinctively, I felt my stomach. The pain had stopped.

The bird was wedged near the bonnet. The sight of it reminded me of Lawrence with his head bent backwards. I started crying and Howard drove with his hands clenched tightly on the steering wheel. A semi trailer and a car with an old caravan on the back passed us. Finally, he veered into the nearest truck stop, undid his seatbelt, and held me tightly until I calmed down.

We got out and looked at the bird. Without saying anything Howard went to the boot and came back wearing surgical gloves and picked up the lifeless thing with a plastic bag. He had some disinfectant in a bottle and sloshed it on the windscreen and then wiped it clean with a wad of paper towel.

"You're very organised," I said.

"Safe work practices."

"For driving?"

"For necromancy."

"Why do you need gloves?"

"Things can get messy."

"When you're bringing up the dead?"

"Yes."

He peeled the gloves off, tied up the bag and deposited it in a bin already attracting frenzied activity from a thick shadow of blowflies.

"You should wear gloves," he said.

"When I try to conceive Lawrence's baby?"

"When you paint. Cadmium poisoning is serious."

"Oh, come on."

"The colors you spread on canvases could also be your death warrant."

"I'm careful with cerulean blue. I've never had cobalt poisoning yet."

"Zinc white or titanium white carries a California health warning for lead content."

I laughed. "I've never met an artist who would so much as wash their hands before eating a sandwich while working with those paints."

Howard took my face in his hands. I flinched. It had been six months since the accident. Yet Howard assured me Lawrence was still alive, scattered through the bodies of those who received his donated organs.

"Please don't touch me."

"The eyes contain the secrets of our bodies. I am looking for signs."

"Of what?"

"Toxic traces leave a residue pattern. The surface of the eye is like a Wheel of Fortune, with sections for every part of the body; brain, trachea, uterus, liver, heart."

"What do you see?"

Howard stood so close his skull cufflinks were cold on my cheeks. We stared at each other as cars flew past on the freeway. Finally, he pulled himself away.

"Nothing sinister."

"What do you expect to find in the recipient's eyes?"

"I can tell whether there is a struggle between the life force of the donor trying to get out and the determination of the recipient trying to keep the organ inside."

"You'll be able to see Lawrence?"

"The soul isn't lost at death but its path to reincarnation is affected by the donation process. My task as a necromancer is to facilitate passage to a resolution."

"Why do you really keep surgical gloves in the car?"

"Old habits."

"From when you were in the police force?"

He shook his head. "The mortuary."

We didn't stop until we had reached Lorne, where the long strip of coffee shops and restaurants and sightseers made me feel comfortable again. Howard and I sat in a crowded cafe sipping strong lattes and eating toasted cheese and ham sandwiches. It was always good being around people. The sound of milk being frothed was comforting.

I settled in with an old copy of *Epicure* but Howard took it from my hands.

"Let's talk about the cornea recipient. His name is Cameron Waller."

"Do I play the nun again?" I asked.

"No, he's not religious. His mum is a school teacher and he inherited a maternal degenerative condition that caused him to go blind."

"Is he still at school?"

"No, he graduated a year ago. He's a model train fanatic and sells hand made train parts on the Internet. Apparently he wanted to be a photographer, which is pretty ironic."

"But now he has Lawrence's eyes."

"To be technical, his corneas. It's not always successful surgery, and I got the reports back from my source at the hospital. It's not looking good. Cameron's already had one episode of rejection."

I sipped my coffee. What was Lawrence trying to tell me?

"So how am I going to win Cameron's trust? Pretend to be a train collector?"

"Your cover is a journalist interviewing him for a magazine article. I'll film the trains in action for some video footage. Cameron is expecting us."

"So, like last time, we talk, have a cup of tea, you drug him and then –"

"You take his clothes off and get him ready. It shouldn't be taxing. He is 19 after all."

I laughed. "He's probably always ready. I shouldn't have agonized about what I would wear today."

"Have you thought about what are you going to do if this teenager turns out to be the one? What if you want him for longer than it takes you to conceive?"

I heard the judgment in his voice and bristled. "I wasn't aware it was

any of your business."

"Well, it's just that he's very young."

"It's not as if I would be seducing a child." Actually, not far off the voice in my head taunted me. "He is over eighteen. That's a legal adult."

"You have no idea do you? The effect you have on men. You'll break his heart."

I laughed. "I'm middle aged! I'm fifty! I'm probably older than his mother."

"You're a very attractive woman."

"Maybe to a man – but Cameron is young enough to only be interested in sex. And I just want him for one night. Not even a night, just until he ejaculates."

"You are such a romantic."

"I just want to get pregnant, I don't want a relationship. Anyway, Cameron won't know what's happened. You are going to drug him. It's no different than if he went to a pub, took someone home and didn't use a condom."

Even with the buzz of conversation around us, when I looked up I realized a few people were looking at me with interest. I blushed.

Cameron's house was a surprise. It was an A Frame of the sort that had been popular in the 1970s, and its steep sides – probably to avoid the roof being crushed by a heavy European snow fall – looked faintly ridiculous in the Australian bush.

Cameron opened the door. He looked like the kid behind the counter at the local milk bar.

"We're from the paper," said Howard, behind me. He held up a card which I saw had an emblem on it and was stamped *International Press Agency*. "We're here to do a story on your model train set."

"Yeah, cool."

I expected to see his mother peering anxiously from the corner, but Cameron said she was a teacher and out all evening doing parent-teacher interviews. Howard didn't look surprised. I guessed he'd done his research and planned it this way.

A dog reared up from where it had been lying near the fire place, suddenly barking and snapping at Howard.

“Jazz! Come on, mate. Hey, sorry about this,” Cameron tried to grab the Rottweiler’s collar but was thrown back onto the floor with the force of the struggling dog. I stood frozen while Howard took the collar and told the dog to sit in a stern voice. It obeyed him immediately.

“I worked a lot with rottys,” he explained.

“In newspapers?” asked Cameron as he got up from the ground. “Wow, cool.”

I don’t know what Lawrence was like at nineteen. But I imagined more talkative than Cameron. Lawrence had charmed his way into a cadetship when he left school and by the time he was twenty two, he was already editing a small country newspaper. Cameron looked like he should be in front of an XBOX control. He was tall, like Lawrence, but reed thin, with a plaid shirt opened over a Def Leppard T Shirt and a pair of jeans that looked too big. As he showed us through the house to the converted garage where his model train set was installed, I compared him to Howard. One was a man, the other still a half-child.

I had no desire to have sex with Cameron. I thought of men who had to ejaculate into a jar for their partners on IVF. At least they were given porn magazines to prepare. Just because I wanted a baby, just because I was ovulating and my mucus was exactly the right consistency, it didn’t mean I was in the mood. I felt awkward. Self conscious. Old. I wanted to go back to my studio and paint. But my body betrayed me. That dragging, painful pulling in my right ovary reminding me with every step that I was fertile, ovulating and ready. Like it or not, I had to seduce Cameron.

“Amazing,” said Howard as Cameron opened the door to the train room. I feigned excitement as I looked at the track laid out on three large doors propped up on trestles, all connected by a vast fibreglass and paper mache mountain system. I looked closer and saw that Cameron had fashioned little houses and villages, although not European ones as I had seen in shops, but houses with deep verandahs and water tanks.

“You’ve done an incredible job,” I said honestly. “It’s such fine detail I can see expressions on the people’s faces.”

Cameron puffed up with pride. “Yeah, thanks. I had some problems with

my eyes and couldn’t see anything further away than this –” he placed his hand a few centimetres in front of his face. “So mum suggested we do the train set.”

“How long have you been creating this set up?” asked Howard. He pulled a notebook from his coat pocket and looked just like the journalists who had interviewed me. I wondered what I was supposed to contribute.

Cameron happily showed us his collection, telling us how many rivets were on the side of a particular tender.

“Do you know there were one hundred and thirty three Hornby train models released in 1988?” Cameron told us.

I thought back to 1988. What was I doing then? I was studying painting at RMIT University, although back then it wasn’t a University, just an Institute of Technology. In fact, it started out life next to the State Library as the Working Man’s College – a fact of which I was reminded every time I tried to locate the ladies toilets in the old Gossard factory Building. I was dating a La Trobe University cinema studies student and we spent all our time at the Valhalla Cinema in Richmond. That was where I saw Bertolucci’s film *The Last Emperor*. In 1988, it had won all those Academy Awards. I’d seen it because I was passionate about Tibet. Ironically, it was a film about the belief in reincarnation.

“Was 1988 a special year for your family?” asked Howard. He was intrigued by dates, I had noticed.

“That was the year my older brother was born and my granddad got him a few pieces for his christening. When he died, mum gave me all his stuff. That’s how I started my collection.”

“He died?” I asked.

“Cancer.”

“I’m so sorry. How awful for your mother.”

“Dad couldn’t hack it after that and left. But granddad came over all the time and we set this up.”

I looked at Howard and shook my head. I couldn’t do this anymore. Cameron had been through enough already.

An alarm sounded on Cameron’s phone. He hauled it out of his pocket and switched it off.

“Sorry, I’ve got to take my tablets,” he said. “I had an operation on my

eyes two months ago.”

“What sort of operation?” asked Howard.

“Cornea transplant. Actually, it’s a graft, a bit of skin, not the whole eye. I had this thing I was born with, called keratoconus, and I was just about blind.”

“How do you feel now?” I asked him gently.

“Oh, great I guess. I mean, when they took the bandages off and I could see properly it was awesome. Except for some reason the operation made me color blind.”

My heart skipped a beat.

I wanted to call the baby Sienna after the pigment if it was a girl and Lawrence said that was insensitive considering he was color blind.

“You mean you can’t see colors anymore?” I kept my hands behind my back, massaging my knuckles. I wanted to touch him. Touch his soft skin and feel Lawrence under my fingertips.

“I get things mixed up. Like red and green. The doctors say it’s the medication. But before, when I could hardly see anything, at least I could see colours so I could paint the trains.”

“Did the doctors say it’s going to get better?” asked Howard.

“I hope so,” Cameron mumbled as he left the room.

We followed him up to the kitchen, decorated in earth tones with sunflower tiles inset amongst the rows of oatmeal and mission brown. His immunosuppressants had been put out for him in sturdy Tupperware pill containers.

“Mum freaks when she has to buy the tablets each month,” Cameron said. “We’ve had to cut back on takeaways and stuff.”

Howard diverted Cameron’s attention while I slipped a mandrake tablet into the pile. I hoped Howard was right and this was safer on a young body than the Absinthe. Still, I felt guilty. But the fact that Cameron was color blind was surely a sign that Lawrence’s spirit was strong inside him. I needed to have sex with Cameron for that reason alone. If Howard could really bring forth Lawrence’s spirit while Cameron was inside me, I could get pregnant with Lawrence’s baby tonight. And I’d make sure Cameron enjoyed himself. It wasn’t like this was going to be rape or anything. I told myself that if I caressed his

body and took his cock in my mouth and got no response, I’d stop immediately and go home. That cleared my conscience.

“How much do the tablets cost?” I asked.

“I think its \$10,000 a month.”

“Do you get a rebate?” I asked incredulously. How could people afford to buy these drugs?

Cameron shrugged. “Dunno.”

I discreetly popped a mandrake tablet into my mouth as well, before Howard could see me. I needed all the help I could get to play the part of seductress.

We waited. Cameron offered to show us a DVD a mate had made of his train set up decorated for Christmas, and set to music. As the tablet started to work on me, I watched Cameron with a growing intensity.

All my sexual life I had chosen men a little older than me. Lawrence had been two years older than me, even Leon – the husband I had discarded long ago - was 10 years older and had the heavy air of an old man about him when he was in his thirties. But Cameron seemed more like the beautiful boys that graced western art: the pubescent figures prancing on horseback or sporting wings. I remembered the lithe Eros over Piccadilly Circus when I did my obligatory tour of London. Then the Caravaggio paintings I loved; impish boys with their genitals bared. But I enjoyed these pictures as an artist. I had never cared for their unformed bodies.

I watched Cameron lying on the couch, his shirt slightly lifted up as he sprawled back into the leather, his skin, pale and his chest narrow. But Howard, who sat nearby, had filled out his flesh through years of gym work. When he pulled up the sleeves of his jumper, my eyes lingered that little bit longer on his strong muscles and his tanned skin.

Cameron was milk white and slender and fragile. A lamb stumbling to its feet.

“You want a snack?” asked Cameron. He gazed into my eyes. I tried to see Lawrence there, reflected back to me. Howard said the mandrake could give you the munchies, like hash. Before I could answer, Cameron got up and headed to the fridge, where he pulled out some cheese and salsa. I watched

while he expertly made nachos and marveled at how he barely looked at what he was doing.

“You’re pretty confident around the kitchen,” I observed.

Cameron shrugged. “Yeah, well mum is busy at school and everything.”

He pushed the bowl across the bench towards me.

“Try some.”

I grabbed a handful and took a bite. Hot cheese and sauce spurted down my chin. Cameron offered me a piece of paper towel and instead I took his hand, and placed his finger across my lips, flicking my tongue against his skin. Eyes wide, he leaned closer to me, and I placed his hand on my ample cleavage, and then pulled him to me, kissing him deeply.

Howard stood behind me, so close I could feel his heat. He whispered in my ear. “We need to work fast before his mother comes home.” He took out his mini maglight torch from his pocket and flashed it into my eyes. “You’re ready. He must be done as well.”

I didn’t think we’d have any rituals this time, without the Absinthe, but I was wrong. Howard’s leather backpack contained the familiar black candles.

“Cool. Goth stuff,” murmured Cameron, his pupils wide and dark as he watched Howard light each one while I eased off his top. He was so excited he stumbled and fell over the coffee table, hitting the side of his face. I scooped him up and held him to me, but he didn’t seem to be hurt. Howard gave me a small bottle with the silver top unscrewed and ordered me to make Cameron drink some. Cameron shook his head violently, so I took a swig myself and held the sweet liquid in my mouth. It tasted like marzipan and I bent down and kissed Cameron deeply, pushing the elixir into his willing mouth. I didn’t want him to remember anything.

He opened his eyes, pupils large and black. “Cool.”

I laughed as he jumped up and said we needed music. He sprang around the room like a kitten after a loose thread of wool, dashing from one end of the room to the other until he found the remote control. A Wolfmother song blasted around us. He played air guitar.

“I’ll tell you all the story about the joker and the thief of the night...” sang Cameron.

I got up and danced with him to the driving beat of the music, taking my top off, playing the succubus, my long hair sweeping through the air, flicking across my large breasts as we gyrated. “I said the joker is a wanted man!”

He was Dionysus, the dancing god, the long haired figure clad in animal skins, the teasing boy who used sex as play. I moved my hands around my body, in a slow, suggestive Greek folk dance that only the women of my father’s village are allowed to do. As I brushed my hands over my breasts, Cameron, mesmerized, danced closer to me and the air grew heavy and damp. Our bodies collided and my arms were suddenly around him, pulling him closer as the music pulsated around us.

As I ran my hands over his skin I stopped seeing the boyish thinness. I willed myself to imagine Lawrence. When our lips met he tasted the same, honey and bread and the tang of salsa. I looked towards Howard and instead of staring into the candles he was chanting and looking directly at me.

“Baryolos, Lagoz atha cabyolas, Samahac et famyolas, Harrahya...”

Cameron’s lips were sucking my nipples, but it was Howard I was looking at. I wanted him to react. But he didn’t move from his kneeling position. Apart from the intensity of his gaze, he didn’t acknowledge what I was doing. I gasped as Cameron suddenly pulled me close, his cock hard through his rough jeans. He smelt clean but musty, not aftershave, because his skin was so soft I didn’t imagine he shaved, but the smell of oils or incense.

I wanted to feel him inside me.

My mouth moved to his neck. I covered it with soft kisses. He wore a thick silver necklace around his throat, with a shiny disc. I looked closer at it and saw with a start it was a Medical Alert badge that his concerned mother must have bought him.

A shiver went through me. A cloud of smoke from the candles surrounded Howard. A dog howled. I remembered Howard had tied it up with some rope he had in his bag using a knot I saw only once before, in a remote Greek village near the Albanian border. Instead of snapping, the dog dropped obediently to his feet, whimpering as the bindings were fastened. The Greek word *katadesmoi* literally means bindings. But they are curses, as sure as you’d write the name of the spell against a person on a piece of wood and place it near the cemetery.

Howard chanted:

“Enter here, Lawrence’s ka – we implore thee to cometh forth. Hail, thou crusher of bones who cometh forth... Hail thou Lord of two horns, who cometh forth...”

Cameron greedily pulled off my remaining clothes and a loud moan escaped as he rubbed his hands over me, quickly exploring what had been hidden.

“May the blood of Goddess Isis and the strength of her power be mighty to protect you and guard you from him that would do unto you anything you abominate. May the waters of the Nile rise and engulf this fertile land ready for your seed - “

I drew back in shock as tears of blood rolled down Cameron’s face. But he smiled and said my name. “Xanthe,” in a voice deeper than before.

“Lawrence?”

“I’m here.” It was Lawrence’s voice, from Cameron’s mouth.

“I didn’t think I’d find you again,” I whispered in his ear.

“Be careful. He can see you when he sleeps,” he said.

“Who can?”

I heard Howard say something. I looked up and he shook his head, and pointed at his watch. The time was running out. I stifled a sob and wrapped myself around the body that was unmistakably Cameron.

The music vibrated around my body, and Lawrence-Cameron sang along. *“I’ll tell you all the story about the joker –”*

Then his hands were between my legs, working their way up, one finger circling me and then another, slowly, the way Lawrence always touched me. I turned to Howard. We held each other’s gaze. The thought of him pushing into me made wet with desire and a groan escaped my lips.

I pushed Cameron on the couch and pulled off his jeans. His cock sprang up from a torso that could have been carved by Praxiteles, all marble and devoid of marks, as cool and as smooth as a sculpture. This isn’t rape, I told myself. I bent my head between his legs. He cried out in joy as I lowered my lips around him. I am not forcing him. I wasn’t drunk, I wasn’t sober either. As I took his cock deep into my mouth, I was somewhere else, somewhere the mandrake root had taken me and the black smoke and Howard chanting. I closed my eyes and imagined he was Lawrence.

*“I am Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow
I have the power to be born a second time.”*

Cameron started to thrust urgently and I quickly stopped. The whole point of this exercise was so Cameron ejaculated inside me. I maneuvered myself on top of him. Then I remembered.

“The ring?” I asked Lawrence-Cameron.

His cock was ready, waiting for me. He was as I remembered the young loves of my student days, bursting with impatience and ardor, low on skills but high on testosterone and recovery.

“What does the ring say?” I insisted holding my hand in front of his eyes. Howard had asked me, what is the one thing that Lawrence would know and no one else, and I showed him the engagement ring and what was inscribed inside.

“What?” groaned Cameron, his cock poised and eager.

“The ring, you inscribed it with a poem,” I gasped as his eager fingers pushed hard inside me, two fingers, three fingers, spreading me open, finding me warm and waiting. Little moaning sounds came from my throat, and I whimpered as his cock twitched against my wetness.

“Who so loves believes the impossible.”

“Yes, my love.”

I grabbed his cock and felt that the foreskin was already rolled back. I was pleased he was not circumcised – they were the genitals of a beautiful boy-man god in western art. I mounted him like the sphinx, the monster that would eat him up and cover him with her wings.

I wanted to envelop Cameron and devour him. I sunk deeper into him, the mandrake making my skin hot and flushed. Oh graceful, joyous boy! I felt young again, and in a flash of insight, realised why old men bed young women. Youth is the sweetest drug and Cameron moved inside me with quick and urgent thrusts. And yet, we can only grasp fleetingly the edge of the past, and never really participate fully in the artifice. What delighted me at twenty now merely gnawed at me with the dissatisfaction born of experience. As quickly as we established a rhythm, Cameron galloped ahead to the end, and my own climax receded like the tide – but it didn’t matter. I only wanted to feel the warmth of his release inside me - that would be my reward. When he

screamed in climax, arching backwards, I didn't see Cameron, but St Sebastian, exposed and vulnerable. I expected to see arrows protruding from his flesh. As he lay panting on the dark leather couch, his body looked stark and exposed in chiaroscuro.

"Lawrence?"

There was no reply. The dog started barking ferociously and car lights penetrated the smoke.

"We'd better get out of here," said Howard.

I had forgotten he was there and when I turned to his voice I saw he had already packed his things away. I stood up, and felt the trail of semen running down my leg, thick and copious. There was no time to clean myself and I staggered to the coffee table, fumbling around for my glasses.

Howard gently pushed the frames into my face and pulled my coat around my shoulders. We left Cameron lying naked and spent on the couch. I took one last look before we left – he was content, I am sure. It was not rape.

The cold night air made me gasp. Howard shone the tiny maglight ahead and we left via the backdoor. He'd parked the car away from the main vantage points and by the time we saw the light going on upstairs, we were already far enough away for the shimmer to be a mere pinprick on the night sky.

We drove for about twenty minutes into the rainforest and it was pitch dark, the headlights briefly illuminating the giant tree ferns. Abruptly, Howard pulled the car over to the side of the road.

"I'm too smashed, I can't drive anymore."

I was pleased I was not the only one out of control. I thought of Howard's eyes on me as I fucked Cameron, and how I imagined Howard's lips on my nipples.

"By dawn the Mandrake will have worn off and we can head back to Melbourne," said Howard. "Okay?"

I nodded, and shivered. Howard took off his coat and draped it over me.

We woke to the raucous sound of birds and I glanced at my watch – we'd been asleep for about nine hours. The weak daylight broke through the tall trees and the car was so cold we could see our breath. Silently, we started back to Melbourne.

By the time Howard pulled into a truck stop outside Geelong, I was desperate to use the toilet.

In the cold room, with goose bumps on my skin as I hitched up my skirt, I finally wiped the residue from my flesh and cleaned myself up. When I looked in the mirror, I looked normal. There was no lingering afterglow on my face. Apart from the hope that tiny cells were multiplying and dividing deep inside my body, and that the essence of Lawrence was among the DNA, there was no reason to suspect I was anything other than exhausted after a long drive.

I was desperate for a strong coffee and made straight for the counter, but before I caught the waitress's eye, I saw the television report. Howard was watching it as well, along with a group of truck drivers and an older couple in matching biker outfits.

"Police say that the murder took place sometime after six o'clock last night and were shocked and sickened by the savagery. The victim's eyes had been gouged out of his head in what some are already speculating is a ritual killing. Cameron's mother said he was being interviewed for a magazine but police say they are unable to trace the journalist who allegedly came to the house. The search continues as"

I didn't hear any more. I just watched the images. The A frame House, A school photo of a smiling Cameron, his mother crying with an older woman's arms around her, police tape over the front door.

And deep inside me was the last piece of Cameron that existed. Except it wasn't Cameron. It was Lawrence. It really was.

I looked at Howard, who crushed his coffee cup with one hand and tossed it into the bin.

What had I done?