Life and Sauce

Inspired by Han Kang’s depictions of sexuality and the grotesque in her novel *The Vegetarian*

1

I went to Woolworths on a shopping spree, buying up Annalisa peeled tomatoes and a jar of taco sauce, which I spilled on the way home.

I saw Carrie-Anne in Woolworths, looking at a packet of mince. Inspecting it, holding it up under the light, looking at the meat bulging against plastic.

She told me that she’d been working on her arm strength, and that she’d been doing elbow stands in the laundry. And she rolled up her sleeves, and showed me rows of yellow and grey bruises. She said she needed a new mat, because her mat was from Target and too thin.

Carrie has long blonde hair with grey roots, which she tucks into a comb at the nape of her neck. I said goodbye, and moved in the direction of the checkouts, my jar of sauce intact.

And when I came out the front I had my knapsack on the front of my body so I could fiddle with the zips, and the jar and two tins leapt out, rolled a short distance, and cracked against a concrete plant pot.

A woman came out of a homewares shop and looked at the puddle of glass and orange liquid, and me, crouching next to it, rubbing my temples.

2

At ten p.m. the street is empty and warm. The puddle is lit up; chunks of red pepper are made to glint under a street light. The scent is stronger now, and a man coming out of the sliding doors at BWS thinks he can smell tomato.

The first mouse runs past at eleven. Scurrying along the gutter with its stomach close to the ground. It hoists itself up, up and onto the raised pavement, and dips one paw in sauce. Twitching, and then three other paws, and then the mouse is standing in sauce, twitching furiously.

5

I crouched before my lake of sauce, rubbing my temples. It was a weekend that nobody was home, a lonely taco weekend. Women with yoga mats on the corner looked at each other and at the tops of their childrens’ heads. The man in the BWS looked at the register. I picked up and walked away, guilty.

6

And later, the pieces of red pepper are watching as the pub closes. A couple trips out, lit up under their own motion sensor street lamp. He is big and bald, no socks. She is laughing.

The chunks are still.

The couple are kissing, pink and greasy under the lamp. He has his hand on a buttock, still illuminated, milking. If they move a metre to the right they will be in darkness.

And now two hands, one on each, the same motion, grabbing and releasing, clawlike, and her shoulders are rising and falling out of time because she is still laughing. She is finding it all very funny.

The chunks are totally still, watching, or maybe quivering slightly.

7

In the kitchen I have an exercise bicycle standing in front of the radio set, and Phillip Adams talks about cannibalism while I move my legs in tight muscular circles. The beans are bubbling on the stove. I have it at high heat. They’re bubbling too vigorously, and starting to wheeze.

In the cupboard I have various powders, and I add paprika and chilli flakes and a mix of italian herbs to the warm pot, which continues to wail. I lean in and the beans are writhing, emerging and bursting from their dark purple skins. And the bubbles are huge, crying specks of tomato are catching on my nose and forehead.

8

It is midnight and the taco sauce is no longer orange; it’s brown.

The laughing woman has her back to the traffic. She wears a complicated red top, interesting strings going back and forth on the back, and the bones sticking into her back emerge and disappear as she laughs. And the top of a bald head, bobbing around her neck.

She has on little slipper kinds of shoes, with little heels, and she starts to topple around, from one foot to the next, laughing. His head keeps bobbing around her neck, working on a patch of her neck, and they tip from side to side on the pavement, at a diagonal distance from the BWS.

A close family of cockroaches is feeling its way around the edge of my lake of sauce.

9

I dread the lonely moment after I turn off the lamp and put my head on the cold side of the pillow. The house is totally still. There is a quiet rain outside, in the warmth.

Phillip’s radio guest was a lady anthropologist, who laughed inappropriately between remarks about cannibals.

The muscles in my calves hurt under the covers, and a smell like tomato hangs over it all.

10

Tomorrow the smell has gone and the air is bright and cold; a group of child buskers are playing clarinets outside the supermarket. Women with yoga mats are all over. They wear leggings and large round sunglasses.

The BWS opens at nine. Now, Janette arrives with a key to open the homewares shop. Her hair is dark and shines; too voluminous. She looks embarrassed when she emerges again from the shop, with a stack of power towels and her eyes on the sauce. She feels she hasn’t chosen the correct cleaning aide.

11

At five minutes past midnight the last city bus pulled up. The bald man stepped back from her neck to look at her.

So she stopped laughing bit by bit, we could see it in her shoulders. Sputtering, running out of funny things.