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THE LAST TASMANIAN

Sarah Klenbort

Note to the reader: Twelve thousand years ago the land bridge that connected Tasmania to mainland Australia was covered by water. As a result the Aborigines of Tasmania developed differently from their ancestors on the mainland—they spoke their own language, had distinguishing physical characteristics, and, in short, were considered a separate race. The end of the eighteenth century brought English settlers to Tasmania, who felt that this island, surrounded by rugged coastline and rough seas, was the ideal place for a penal colony. Soon after the English and their convicts began arriving in Tasmania, Aborigines began to die. Some died from diseases brought by settlers; others were killed in conflicts as they tried to hold onto their land. Records show that often Tasmanians were simply shot dead by whites. As a result, the entire population of Aboriginal Tasmanians was killed just eighty years after the British settlers arrived. The last Tasmanian Aboriginal, a woman named Truganinni, died in 1876. What follows is her story, an account of the ghost of Truganinni.

I am restless, unsatisfied. Lying on a cushioned sofa in a pink man's house, I dangle one weightless leg off the edge and think: in life I would've *killed* for this. One grows bored quickly in eternity. Every sofa feels the same. Every pink man's living room: identical. The same drawn curtains reveal the same bay window, looking out on the same shiny automobile.

Drifting into the pink man's bedroom, I watch him in his pink slumber. His mouth is open and one arm's flung carelessly over the woman next to him. A pink breast peeks out of the covers, reminding me that I, too, once had breasts that were full and round and weighty.

What pink worlds do they dream of? Children's soccer matches—pink kiddies chasing a ball down a field. Or office parties, secretaries in too much make-up drinking prickly rum and Coca-Cola. Maybe they dream of shoes, the sexy steady knock, knock, knock of high-heeled shoes on hardwood floors.

I want to sneak inside their heads, slip inside their dreams as I

slip into their houses, but this is one luxury I am not afforded.

Pacing without a sound from bed to window and back again, I listen to their rhythmic breaths. A crow caws outside, sounding like a sick cat or a baby. A crinkled Post-It note lies discarded on the windowsill: *toilet paper, bananas, razors, margarine.*

I want to *do* something, make something happen. The world changes all around me and I stay just the same.

Floating into the child's room, I watch the pink baby girl dream and think of doing something cruel. I place my old woman hands just above her soft pink neck and *squeeze* with all my might. Nothing. Calloused brown fingers slip through flesh like blades of grass slicing the breeze. I imagine the texture of this baby's neck; I've forgotten what flesh feels like. I imagine her large shrill scream—if only I could make her scream, crush that pink flesh. The baby gurgles, startling me; I jump back and remove my hands, ashamed of my thoughts and my cruel intentions.

The pink man reckons we're all sinners, even that lump of pink flesh in the cradle; the pink man has some funny ideas.

Passing through glass patio doors, I stand on the balcony that overlooks the city. Outside the wind has picked up. I can't feel wind but I can see its effects: trees shiver; a child's plastic toy blows across the lawn. Wind goes through me. I am alone.

The wind seems different tonight, looks as if it's carrying something. I try to see what this is but there are only trees swaying and that damned crow cawing, a low, guttural call now, like an old man dying.

Leaping off the balcony, I glide up the hill, against the wind. I pass planted citrus trees and then I see it. Could it be? Yes, the shape of another soul—a surprise. Mount Stuart is my haunt.

"Hello," I say.

"Hello?" the voice is timid, hesitant. "Can . . . you . . . see me?"

"Of course," I laugh. The newly dead are so refreshing. Like children, they are shy and curious. This one's pink and bald and clueless. "Welcome," I say.

“Who are you?” he whispers. As if someone could hear us.

“Truganinni.”

He stares at me.

“You know,” I say, “the last full-blooded Aboriginal Tasmanian. You read about me in school . . .”

“My God, you’re . . .”

“Dead,” I say, “like you.”

I watch him watch himself. He slowly lifts a ghostly arm, studies it and puts it down. He walks through a lemon tree. “Ha ha!” he says, “Tee hee!” I don’t tell him how fast he’ll tire of this game, how soon he’ll long to slap his hand against rough bark and *feel* the sting of it. In a few days or weeks or years—it’s all the same now—he’ll wrack his brain to remember what bark felt like.

“I *do* remember,” he says, “your photograph . . . you look different. Younger.”

“Thank you,” I say, for vanity survives old age and even death. “I hate that picture,” I tell him. “I look so proud, defiant, *old*. We had to sit so still, you see?”

“Um,” he says, jumping through the lemon tree.

“It used to be you could see my skeleton, hanging, in the museum, *The Last Tasmanian*.” This stills him. “Times have changed and so has my story.”

“What is your story again? It’s been awhile. I forget.”

“Which version? I’m still waiting for the movie.” I smile.

The pink soul looks confused.

“Okay,” I say, “all right. This much is true: I tried to save my people. There was a pink Christian man who helped, Robinson—a friend, a lover . . .”

“Pink?”

“Like you. You say white but look at you.”

He looks at the skin on his hands as if for the first time.

“Robinson convinced me to follow the pink man’s rules. We went to that island the pink man gave us—a cold, windy place. It stunk of death before we even started dying. We had to go. Robinson said it was the only way. The pink men hated us, were

shooting us dead like kangaroos. I believed my pink Christian friend, and I convinced the others to follow. I even prayed to the pink man's bloody God. They all died there, on Flinders. Even though Robinson told us Flinders Island was the only way. He had the best intentions."

"I'm sorry," he says and shakes his head.

"This much is also true: I watched my mother stabbed to death by sealers; blood spurted from her heart like a tiny fountain. My father was murdered too, but I didn't see. My sister: raped, killed by a pink man. And my fiancé." I pause. "Paraweena. He swam out to get me one day. I was on a boat with two pink men, whalers—I know what you're thinking; I know what they said about me but I was young and curious. Paraweena thought I was in danger; he swam out to rescue me. But it was too far and he was not a strong swimmer. When he grabbed onto the pink man's boat, they chopped his hands off at the wrists. Paraweena drowned in purple water—you should've seen the color. His dead hands gripped the boat."

"Jesus," he says.

"And they say we were brutal."

A touch of pink man's guilt flashes cross his dead face. After a while, he asks, "Are there others? Like you?"

"A few," I say. "Mostly they're out west. They prefer the wilderness. It's only me that likes it urban. I like to slip through the pink man's picket fence, glide through his bolted door. I like to read his books—there's a lot of time. You'll see. I like to sit and listen to his modern noises: the rush of water through a tap, the tick, tick, tick of a gas burner lighting, the mechanical birdcall of the internet connecting."

The dead soul looks away.

"I don't fit in," I say. It's been so long since I've talked to anyone, since I've told my story: I have to tell it or it stops being real. "I don't fit in with my people or with yours. It's because I'm half pink myself. Not in color . . ."

"Between worlds," he says.

Maybe he's not so clueless.

“What . . . what about the mainland? Have you been there? Victoria, New South Wales . . . Darwin! Have you been to Darwin, to see your cousins there?”

“Cousins? Well, it’s only been 12,000 years.” Why does the pink man think we’re all the same?

I watch him squirm inside his new dead soul.

“Goodbye,” I say and leave before he has a chance to leave me first.

“W-w-w-wait! I have to ask . . .”

I don’t wait. I float up Mount Stuart Road feeling angry and uneasy.

I fly straight up the tarmac road that overlooks the city. I pass square houses and square balconies—the pink man likes his squares. Hedges mark square lots of land. Roses peek through picket fences (nature prefers a circle). But even the pink man’s flowers have their spikes.

The pink man likes his barbs. His drink—we stole a bottle once when I was still alive, took it from the cold box and drank it down fast—it was filled with a thousand tiny spikes that prickled my tongue and throat. The drink made me warm and easy and then it made me sleep. When I woke, one of the spikes had grown large and lodged itself between my brow and skull.

The pink man likes his lines. Columns of words on a page, rows of grapevines up a hill, a strip of tarmac cross a harbor. I reckon it’s the lines that killed us. Not his guns or spikes, not all his fancy words, not even his disease. It was the borders, the squares: we could never get used to four walls. (At Flinders, we didn’t stay in the houses they had us build for ourselves. We sat on the beach instead and stared back at our homeland: it was close enough for us to see and far enough away for us never to get back. Distance made the mountains look soft and blue.)

The pink man likes to build. He likes his lights and so do I. At night they sparkle like sunlight on the sea, like stars in the sky only brighter, closer. At the top of Mount Stuart I look down at the city, such a beautiful city, and yet I want to crush it, plunge the pink man into darkness. I float around the top of

Mount Stuart until silhouettes of mountains appear with the dawn. They look more like hills today. I hate it when the pink man's right.

I make the crossing at night. I've always preferred the spirit who governs the night to the spirit who governs the day. Preledee—even his name is pretty, boring, bland—you can see right through him. Wrangiowrapper is the spirit of the dark and he's as infinite as I am. I float across waves lit only by the moon, over the sea the pink man calls Bass Straight—the pink man likes to name. We were satisfied with ocean. (Then again, we were satisfied with grease and charcoal smeared on skin to keep us warm in winter.)

The water is strangely calm. I look forward to getting there, to getting somewhere, to seeing these cousins of twelve thousand years ago. I wonder if they'll feel my presence.

It's been one hundred twenty-nine years since I was alive and even longer since I saw my mother, but it's her I think of now, as I glide across the sea. I remember her dark darting eyes, formed by fear. The pink man came when she was just a baby. Her family hid from him at first, watched him from behind the trees. *We should never have come out from the trees*, she used to say. I remember the jawbone that hung around my mother's neck. It was the bone of her sister, who'd died before I was born. The pink man called this sacrilegious and so did I, until they killed my mother and we buried her, *all* of her. I wanted to hold onto one small part of her, carry her with me like she carried her sister. She didn't carry much; they didn't. They traveled with the seasons and they traveled light. They went north for seals in autumn and south for swan eggs in spring. They carried a basket and a digger. They carried water, and around their necks, close to their breasts, they carried pieces of the dead, whose names were never mentioned.

I arrive at daybreak and rest—the dead get tired too, though we can never sleep. I stop and watch the waves. They rise up blue and clap down white against the beach.

Floating east, beach turns to cliffs, then bush, then beach again. I don't see any footprints. I've heard about the vast distances here but it's different to *see* it for yourself. Everything is bigger, even the kangaroos. Otherwise, it's much the same, there's just more of it. An echidna wobbles forward, his pointy snout scrounging in the dirt. Two seagulls chase each other across the sky. Black and white terns peck at wet sand. A white-bellied sea eagle follows me, so close I can hear the rustle of his great wings, and I think that he *must* sense my presence. It feels so good to be noticed until he flies off, out to sea, and I'm alone again.

Dusk arrives and I look for a place to rest. I find the perfect spot: a cliff that overlooks the sea. Perching on the ledge, I listen to the waves break below. It's a clear night and the moon outshines the stars again.

"Hey," I hear a squeaky voice say. "That's *my* seat, *thank* you."

A pink teenage ghost of a girl with long, white, wild hair floats in front of me over the ocean.

Her arms are crossed against a flat chest; her white hair blows out and all around her. "I'd appreciate it if you'd *move*. Pul-*ease*. I've been sitting here for, like, *seven years*."

Isn't it just like the pink to be as possessive in death as they were in life? "I'm sorry," I say and move.

She sits, then, like a princess, twirling a strand of long white hair. Her skin is almost as fair as the hair on her head. She looks thirteen.

"Where are you from?" I ask.

"Coober Pedy, South Australia. You?"

"Tasmania. I've just arrived . . ."

"There are plenty of other cliffs down that way," she points a skinny ashen finger east, "but none as nice as this. . . . *Look!*" She shouts, "A shooting star!" A light falls quickly cross the stars.

"Wish, wish, make a wish! Damn. They always go too fast. Usually I have a wish ready but you distracted me. Where are you from again? You don't *look* Australian."

"Tasmania. I'm Aboriginal."

“Oh, but I thought you were all *dead*.”

“We are.” We look at one another, the girl and I. She smirks, I smile and then we laugh. Deep, dead-belly laughs. We laugh at ourselves and our predicament.

“I was the last one,” I say.

“What a claim to fame!”

We laugh again and then there’s silence. “Tell me, girl,” I say. “Do you have a wish ready now?”

“Wishes are stupid,” she says and looks out at the blank, black ocean.

I leave the white-haired girl staring out to sea, and travel to the city.

Melbourne’s all trams and traffic jams, restaurants and coffee shops. Melbourne is more suits than I have ever seen—not in Hobart, not anywhere. I stand at the Flinders Street intersection, next to the big yellow building they call historical. It’s forty years younger than I am. Early evening comes; pink people push past one another. Of course the pink man’s not just pink anymore—he’s Chinese and Korean, Indian, Nigerian—he’s pink all the same. Pink’s not a color; it’s a state of being.

I float up and down the blocks: William Street and King Street, Leicester Street and Peel. A tram goes through me; I feel nothing.

All the time I’m looking for someone with skin like mine. When I finally see a brown man, he’s dressed just like the pink: belly bulging over belt, a pink tie strangling his neck. Floating next to him—he walks fast—I try to listen for his steps but there are so many steps around us that I can’t distinguish his from all the rest. I go in front of him, beside him. I scream a voiceless scream into his left ear. His mind is somewhere else, on a conference call at work, perhaps, or what he’ll have for dinner. I let him go, disappear inside the big yellow building. I sit on top of the train station and watch the rest of the businessmen and women pass by. Then I watch drunken backpackers come out and stumble from one pub to the next. Shoulders up against

the cold, they shiver inside their T-shirts. I miss being cold.

That night I fly north.

Sydney's Harbor is a children's picture book: the Opera House, the Harbor Bridge, the Manly Ferry and its tail of whitewater. Painted Aboriginals on Circular Quay don't look real.

I float up George Street with the morning rush, past the souvenir shops with singing stuffed koalas at *low, low prices!!!* When I arrive at that square stone building they call Town Hall, I spot them: five brown men in beards and blankets. They sit outside the main train station asking for money from passersby: busy businessmen, plump tourists, foreign students. The office-goer glares; the tourist gives a piteous glance; the student scuttles off to class.

I sit with them while they drink from brown bottles. Together we watch the world go by without us. "But you are still *alive!*" I shout, and either they don't hear or they pay no attention. As the morning wears on, my companions get progressively drunk. They begin to slur their words, which pick up a nasty tone. Someone starts an argument about ten dollars, *you owe me!* He shouts. Voices rise. Pink people scatter. A bottle is broken and I'm grateful for flight. As I float up and over them, I hear a howl and look down in time to see a sliver of glass skim a cheek and a thick drop of blood fall to the concrete. I don't miss blood.

Gliding over the postcard city, I pass crowded suburbs and white beaches. I speed up. I'm looking for something, but I don't know what it is.

When I finally stop, it's just before the other end of this vast continent.

The north is heavy with sun. Heat so strong I can *see* it. Heat so hot and dry, it sparks fires in the bush and sends small critters scattering. It warms the largest water hole. It keeps things slow. I watch people move through the long day, barefoot and sluggish. They look like how I feel. Brown people are everywhere here. They are strange and yet familiar. I feel both at home and very

far away.

Drifting above Kakadu, I see crocodiles baking in the sun. The river looks like a giant snake out of a story from my childhood. The bush is brown and stretches on for miles. Crackling dry, it waits for the next fire. If I were alive, I'd feel thirsty just looking at it.

Then I see the strangest sight: a group of pink people in line, hunched over, holding spears. They're following a brown woman through the bush.

Although I know that it's not possible, it looks like they are *stalking* her. It looks as if they're going to throw their spears at her back. Hunting her the same way we were hunted, one hundred fifty years ago. I go closer. My invisible heart pounds. The pink people are sweaty and smeared white with sunscreen. They have hats on their heads and cameras round their necks.

Then I see. The brown woman in front is also carrying a spear. Up ahead is a wallaby. She turns to the pink man behind her and whispers something. The pink man awkwardly throws his spear; it wobbles through the air. Surprisingly, it hits the wallaby, just above its tail. The beast lets out a terrible screech, echoed by a pink woman in the line. The wallaby tries to jump away and the brown woman hurls her spear, killing it on the spot.

The pink woman cries.

The pink man takes a picture.

The brown woman moves towards the dead wallaby.

Sniveling now, the pink woman wipes her nose, and I hear her husband say, "But you *wanted* the Hunting and Gathering Tour, Love."

The trip home is quicker. I don't stop. I fly right over the red center, over deserts and mines. When I get home, my mountains look like mountains again. I am tired but the tiredness feels different, light.

Floating up Mount Stuart Road, a voice startles me. "Truganinni."

I turn to see the not-so-newly-dead man and his bald

translucent head.

“You,” I say. His blue eyes look gray.

“I’m homesick.”

“I know.”

“I want to go back.”

“You can’t.”

Returning to my favorite pink man’s house, I curl up on his sofa and listen to the tick tick tick of his Ikea clock. For the first time in 130 years, I fall asleep and dream of pink children rising in the morning, coming out of their bedrooms, climbing with their sock feet onto the couch, on top of me. I am invisible; I am always here.