

Exploded View

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Morning. Here is father man off to the office. He leaves the house. He laces his boots on the back step and walks across the lawn. He walks through the pine trees to the workshop at the corner of the block and rolls up the roller door. All of his tools are resting on the shadow board. All of the parts are there, filleted out on the bench in front of him.

Here is a bonnet propped open. Dirty hands father man has under the metal lid, dirty hands pecking. Check the terminal connections at the battery for tightness and freedom from corrosion. Check the battery in its carrier for looseness. The electrolyte in each cell must be topped up with special laundry water that a mother uses in her iron.

Father man spends his days at the bench or in the pit or under the bonnet. He checks, finds the fault, adjusts.

Nothing soft, nothing that bends, nothing that holds liquid, nothing that flows or splashes can be relied upon, in an engine. Over time a seal will always leak. The water will spill and be used up. There isn't much that's female in an engine. Oils and rubbers, acids and waters – these are the first places to look for faults.

Babette, our cat, likes to lie down in a patch of sun on the concrete ramp that leads into father man's workshop. She'll roll onto her back and lick the tufty fur on her stomach as if she's doing housework. Babette isn't from now – she belongs to the time before. Father man doesn't chase her away. He pretends that she doesn't exist.

Mother is at the bus stop down on the highway waiting to catch the 14 to town where she has a desk in an office with a drawer for her red handbag and her folding umbrella and her Cup-a-Soup. At lunchtime she can do word puzzles or read her Mills & Boon while she drinks the tomato soup from her Cup-a-Soup cup.

The football slaps into my brother's hands as he walks up the road to meet the bus to school. Sport is work for boys. Every day my brother must practise for the running bounce. There's nobody to make you get on the bus. My brother knows I am behind him on the walk up the road but once the bus door opens he doesn't look back.

You can keep walking. Walk the firewood tracks. Lie down on the C. Y. O'Connor pipeline. Walk to the tip and search the heaps. Climb the rubbish hill to watch the trucks on the highway gather speed, watch their cargo wobble as they take the corner, as they skirt the arrester bed. Then you can walk home and slip back in through the front window of your own house, or another house nearby. You can tiptoe around all day or go out into the garden and climb a tree. There's no need to speak. I talk to the skins, but not to people. You have to stop listening to yourself to be able to speak. Seventeen days then, without speech. You are only lost to others – not inside yourself.

A little later. The sun is getting higher, but it doesn't touch me up here in the tree. The sunrays hit the bottom pane of frosty glass on the front door of the fat lady's house next door and then the middle pane. Once they hit the top pane the door opens and the fat lady appears as if she's been flushed out, as if she's surrendered. She closes the door and turns to lock it behind her, the key glinting back at the sun as she slips it from the tumbler. She comes out from under the porch, the sun shining through her curls, her scalp a boiled egg beneath them. Can she feel the halo? The virgin has a halo in the pamphlets the Mormons leave on the bus. The Mormon virgin is thin and clean with long yellow hair and a golden headband powered by sunlight. The fat

lady next door has a frill of dirty sheepskin around her slippered feet and a stretchy purple dress that's hitched up at the front. The orange gravel receives one fat foot and then the other; the same pieces of gravel are moved around each day. She can't see me up here, high in the tree. But even if she could, even if she threw something, it wouldn't reach. The fat lady holds on to the hot air for balance. She pants as she reaches the letterbox. Her tongue is short and pointed like a trowel but it comes out just far enough to lick her fat lips. She pats the top of the red letterbox and I can hear, a little muffled through the leaves of the orange tree, the sound of the key in her hand making contact with the metal.

When I was small I thought that a letterbox was a miniature version of the house it fronted. Not cute like a doll's house, but real. I thought that inside the letterbox were the rooms, the furniture, the family, of the house behind it. I thought that you could test things there – going into a forbidden room, touching a dangerous item, speaking a word – and because the letterbox was small everything that happened in it could be measured and contained. I'm not embarrassed about this. Children are small. They have small thoughts; small items feel safe to them.

The fat lady has put so much meat around herself it has gone hard. Her sister too. When the fat lady next door meets the sister off the bus and they put their fat arms around each other on the driveway it's like two rocks are being cosy. The day the fat lady next door decided that she wanted to be hard and started to eat, did she tell her sister? Or did the sister just know, and then sitting in her own house that must be somewhere on the bus route, but I've never seen it, she started to eat so they could harden up together? They've been like this for as long as I can remember so I don't know if one of them got there first. Fat isn't like wadding or stuffing. When skin is stretched over fat it can still detect heat or cold. Skin always knows the difference between stroking and gouging.

It's hard to think that a man had a part in making the sisters. A man became a father to make them, and now they have gotten so hard they are no use to other men.

The fat lady's letterbox is empty. It is not the day for envelopes from the council or reminders from the podiatrist. It is not a day when I have written her name on an envelope and licked it shut with nothing inside. The hinge on the lid of the letterbox yawns as she closes it. The fat lady has nothing to hold in her fat hands. She puts them in the pockets of her purple dress, then she makes for the backyard to let the chickens out of their coop and sit farting on her deckchair among them.

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I climb down from the tree and walk along the road towards the fence on the far side of the fat lady's house. It's a brick house with matching eye-windows on its front face. There are three wires to slip through and the weeds and the gravel to cross on the approach to the rear wall of the laundry. The bricks stop at waist height; above them are trays and trays of dirty louvred glass. It's the same as pulling sheets of paper from an envelope, except the glass must be laid gently, in order, on the ground. Each louvre must be returned to its correct tray before leaving. Cobwebs will be torn and the glass will be smeary from my fingers, but the fat lady won't notice. Now the fat has come up she has gone inside herself. She has given up on looking.

The laundry has halfway air and halfway things that live outside and in: a tub splattered with lilac paint, dead tomato plants, gardening tools, a broken plastic laundry basket, bags of hen pellets, a greasy leather dog-collar hung on a nail. I know the tired sound of the doors. I know the dimness of the hallway, the dust on the lounge room curtains that has matted together so it hangs proud of the lace now, in its own furry layer. The tick tick of the electric clock on the kitchen wall bounces through the serving hatch. When I was small I climbed up into that hatch

and pulled the doors around me and sat waiting for the ticks to float over my head from the kitchen to the front room, kissing each one on its way through.

I kneel on the brown carpet in front of the fat lady's china cabinet. I like to run my tongue or my fingers over the lip of a lock. I don't want the old dishes inside the cabinet but I do want the key. I've searched the fat lady's house many times for the key. I'll know it as soon as I put it in my mouth and feel its bitings.

In olden times when girls were yellow with curly tresses and green velvet gowns they wore an iron clamp like a stirrup between their legs with a lock in the front. A charity belt? The boy from the petrol station could take it off me, but he'd need the key. Welding is at the end of the apprenticeship. The boy could steal the welding mask and wear it so I wouldn't have to look at his face as he put the key into the lock. How do you say to the fat lady, *I love you?* Which parts do you love – the older her underneath or what she's put on top? Her face is still pretty, I think. Her lips could still kiss.

The fat lady has left the margarine out on the kitchen bench so I put it back in the fridge. She keeps the tins in there too with the labels peeling off from the damp. There's nothing good for me to eat. The toaster is on the floor next to the rubbish bin. I shake the crumbs into the sink, plug it in and push the lever down; the array is dead again. The fat lady makes the same mistake as my mother: she uses a fork to release bread that's stuck in the grabbers, which snaps the nickel-chromium wires. In any machine the smallest part is often where the break occurs. I take the toaster's shell off with a butterknife, leaning over the bench so the screws fall in sight. The break in the wire is clean and there's enough slack to twist the broken ends together and re-establish contact. I test-toast two slices of white Tip Top and leave them there, peeking out of the bread grabbers, just lightly browned.

When I was small the fat lady didn't lock her house, not that I would have used the door. I know I have grown because now, when I come and go, I must remove and replace four rows of glass louvres. It was only three before.

I walk home along the road. The centre line, not near the verge. A road is a line of communication between houses. Everyone has a right to use it. It doesn't feel my feet on its flinty back. The road is mute; it cannot share what it knows.

And don't think that it was cruelty – putting the empty envelopes in the fat lady's letterbox. It was an experiment about hope.

My brother has sports practice after school so I work on the cars in the afternoons. Father man doesn't have a sign or a certificate. Word of mouth and cash in hand. It's always nice to lift a bonnet for the first time, like opening a suitcase to see the chosen items and admire how they've been packed. It's always nice to switch a new engine on and watch the parts clicking and turning over each other – leads sprouting from the plugs, the head squat and centred like a roast in its tray.

Collect chocks and place within easy reach. Loosen upper suspension fulcrum shaft bolt and chock the arm suitably to hold it in its uppermost position. Empty the sump; bleed the lines. Check batteries and fuses. I have a kerosene drum and a toothbrush to clean the parts. A strip-down is an operation. Douse the part, brush it, rinse it and replace it on the tarpaulin, each part winking in its blue puddle under the sun. A doctor has his nurse to count the parts in and out. I have my two girl's hands. Here I am running my fingertips around each screw and bolt, making a sieve with my fingers to scoop out the fat flies that come down to drink.

It's best to stay outside the workshop. In the summer the tops of the trees are tinselled by the sun. You can wash a car out here and give it back without a service; they always say it runs better. I do tyres too. It isn't easy to get a tyre off a wheel but I don't complain. The Holden badge is a lion with its paw on a round rock. When cavemen saw lions rolling rocks with their paws they must have been happy to know the wheel was discovered. It still looks hard, the

wheel, hidden inside the dark rubber tyre; the cavemen would still recognise it. But the cab, the chassis, the armature, the weight of all the car's parts, sits on air. The real invention was not the rolling of the rock, but the trapping of the sky around it – making a rubber cushion covering for the air. When the surface of a tyre rips, you can see the rubber is woven together like blankets. There are tyre irons with rounded edges to lever the beads off the tyre, one at a time, from the inner flange of each wheel. The inner tube is flaccid, a flop of grey tongue. You drown it in a bucket. You hold it under so bubbles escape through the hole and it tells you where it is cut.

In the winter, rain drips through the trees. The mating surfaces of the ball joint stud and the knuckle tapers must be clean and dry. You do everything forwards and then you do it in reverse. A frog opens its throat in the grass. When it rains you can sit for a while in father man's blue Holden, or in a repair. When father man is out you can slide behind the steering wheel. Ignition. Foot pressed to metal plate. And again. Petrol surges through the lines. The sweet smell of it firing. Tightnesses. The way one part greets and enters another.

There's a blanket on the back seat of father man's Holden. It's a checked picnic blanket that my mother has put there. It's from the time before. It's easy to see that plastic novelty items like yo-yos won't be around in the future. They are cheaply made – they are just for the moment. But a blanket made of wool will give warmth forever. The label says *Household Linens Pty Ltd* and the corner of it has been snipped off with a pair of scissors, which I think means there was something imperfect about it. That it was going cheap.