

She Who Spreads the Jam

Elise Lee

I dream of greatness; greatness in every possible form. I dream of blue skies and flowers that bloom for more than a day. I dream of all those unreasonable things people dream about when they are unsatisfied with their lives. I should not be unsatisfied, I know. But I am.

I want to love him, I really do. He's great, with his neat shirt collars, helpful lawn-mowing and serious briefcase. His hair is dark and neat and his eyes are never mocking, never laughing. In them I see the death of unrealistic dreams — dreams of greatness.

He comes home, day after day, and says the same things. I always know how to answer him. I wish for the day that he asks me something I have to think about. Something that maybe I don't know the answer to. I know everything; perhaps that is the crux of my unhappiness.

I want my life to be about more than what jam to put in his sandwich. And I could never tell him that I don't care about the crease in his shirt, the smudge on his boot-toe. He would look at me, with that look that says 'I feel nothing'. It's true; I've lived with him for fifteen years now. Utter nothingness. Utter bloody nothingness.

When I was a young girl, I thought I would marry a real man. Those men I saw walking around in society were not real men; they were just pretending to be men. They hid behind newspapers so that nobody could see the emptiness in their eyes. It is always with me — emptiness, the memory of it, the fear of it.

I did not marry a man — I married a boy from college who said smart things. And he was smart; everything about him spoke of intelligence. It intrigued me, to think — ‘Here is this boy who knows so much more than me’. I was never extremely smart, that was why he picked me. He could be right forever.

I was so frightened of suburbia. Before *Romeo and Juliet*, before *Oedipus*, *Hamlet* or *Antigone*, that is the greatest tragedy of all — the tragedy of ordinary, unchanging life in suburbia, where every house is pretty much the same as the next. Maybe a window might be placed differently, or a chimney might be missing, but it’s all the same.

No person really wanted to end up there. And here I find myself, looking out the window at a house that is the copy of ours. Or perhaps, our home is the copy of that building beside us — without a name or a face. The letterbox is the same. I am haunted by my dreams of greatness — unfulfilled, forever. I am haunted by the houses in our street.

It has been so many years now since I knew who I was. I just left everything behind to become his wife — I never truly understood what marriage meant. Now I know that it means being a second mother to a man who pretends he doesn’t need a mother. I don’t even want to be his mother.

Long ago I used to play the piano. I played it well. I loved it — the sounds that it made. And all you had to do was press a little key down. In the music I discovered who I wanted to be. In the silence, I heard the music. Yes, it is what all people say. But I don’t care — I’m saying it too.

He doesn’t want a piano in his house. ‘Takes up too much space,’ he said to me when I used to ask. I gave up asking. I haven’t touched a piano in years; haven’t felt the smooth, white ivory beneath my trembling fingers, reluctant to release the magic. I used to cry, but now I just stare ahead, devoid of feeling; my fingers embrace the jam knife.

No, that’s a lie. I feel everything so strongly that it overpowers my ability to recognise emotions. It’s tragic, isn’t

ELISE LEE

it? What my mind has come to. I am not such a fool to suppose that my heart feels. My heart does not feel, it beats, like the blood-pumping organ it is. Mechanically, naturally. It's my mind that aches.

I wrote him a letter once, telling him that I was going away for a while, maybe forever. I was so excited that day. I packed my suitcase with all that was mine — I was shocked to discover the objects of my life. I hummed to myself and imagined I was playing the piano. The possibilities danced around me and I could nearly feel again what it means to live a life for myself.

I could nearly imagine that I was someone who was starting out in the world, going out to realise my dreams of greatness, so unrealistic in every sense. But it didn't matter, because I was ready. He came home and I walked up to him, letter in hand, and knew I would never give it to him. Later I unpacked, as he said something about his work.

That was 10 years ago. Yesterday I sat in the garden and wrote in you, as I do every day, chronicling my life in a few lonely lines floating in expanses of nothingness. Why? Not to remind myself, no. I do not know why. Perhaps because I am a spreader of jam; such a life is mine. Tomorrow, I will do the same. Spread jam, spread silence.

The thing is, he's right about me. I am just a stupid, ordinary girl who irons his shirts and spreads his bread with all sorts of delectable preserves. I no longer fear normality. I am a maid — I was too afraid to become anything more. Greatness — what is it? A delusion? An instrument of torture? A noose around my neck gradually choking me.



Elise Lee wrote this in 2010 when she was in Year 11 at Sacred Heart College Sorrento in Western Australia.