

Glow in the Dark Stars

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Increasingly fat and furious, Dad wakes with a hangover from his fortieth birthday party and grunts, 'We can't afford electricity no more - now turn everything off, don't make me go to the power box.' Dad looks at his family eating breakfast amongst the crap left over from his party and goes back to sleep. Mum, from this moment on, makes sure he's the only one using electricity while he's home.

Evenings get darker, longer and the volume of Mum and Dad's *conversations* increase. Little Nick and Larissa sneak into their big sister, Mia's bed where she tells them stories of funny things she watched people do during the day.

Stealing blue from the sky Mia paints her bedroom walls with it. This means blue can't ever leave, escape or be free again. She decided upon blue the day after Mum fitted her with a training bra; Babette introduced her to Clearasil, razors and demonstrated how to insert tampons; and an animal rights guy on the train taught her what KFC do to their chickens.

Stealing blue was Alice, her orange haired Troll Doll's, idea. Alice has ideas and Mia realises them. Alice hates it without a nightlight and insists upon glow-in-the-dark stars. Mia super glues them to the ceiling in circles round the light bulb.

In the shed, at the side of the house, where broken furniture's stored for the garage sale Mum wants to have, Mia mixes blue food dye with leftover tins of white house paint. On her bedroom walls she details shaded blue images full of messages only her and Alice understand. On the lid of an ice-cream container Mia finds a world of colours by swirling acrylic paints together. On scraps of paper, plastic and wood, with black and white, she practices painting the shadows swelling and swallowing her over and over again. With Alice's make-a-wish hair nearby Mia paints newspapers before Mum reads the TV guide. Her room's become a collection of scraps, ruined clothes and stained carpet. Another wooden spoon's broken on Mia's grazed legs. Mum's nostrils flare and her mouth fumes, 'What's wrong with you? That's it, enough. Pack your stuff, you're moving to the garage right now young lady.'

Mum doesn't realise it's twice the size of Mia's room. Looking at Dad's tools and the amount of space she now has access to Mia stops hearing Mum's voice: 'This'll teach you to respect my house young lady. You'll be lucky if you don't freeze to death in here. But that's your fault. I warned you, can't say I didn't warn you.'

Mia snatches the key to the garage with a grin and starts moving in.

'You have til your father's found me a car to learn your lesson. Otherwise it's off to live with the nuns for you missy.'

Mia smiles at her Mum, who beneath all that huff and puff is such an idiot, and she runs to Dad who helps her carry out the bathroom door he put a hole through the week before. Alice knows exactly how the stolen oil paints from school will be used to create a contemporary version of Goya's Black Period. It's the Term One school break so for two whole weeks, Mia gives herself the project of capturing, on whatever she can get, the images exploding within her eyes like sequenced fireworks. First she paints the nightmares frothing at the edges of her glittering visions; she paints them on pieces of wood and butcher paper; people she loves and hates are given enough detail to make their presence felt on the page.

They are the only company Mia keeps.

Inside the house Mum slaps the wooden spoon on the kitchen bench, 'Mia, this isn't normal, it has to stop. You're not a kid anymore.'

'But—'

Your brother's four, scribble's all he can do. You must start learning your way round the kitchen young lady.'

'But I hate food.'

'Nonsense, your cousins are cooking dinner these days. Find yourself some Italian friends and cook for God's sake you must learn to cook.'

'I'm not into recipes and babysitter club stuff Mum.'

'It's either that, get a job or help me with the washing. What'll it be kid?'

'But I already help Bab's heat up dinner for her family sometimes...'

'That Babette's no good I won't tell you again. Every time you hang out with her you come back either drunk or high. Don't think I don't know about you two.'

'What?'

'Mum raises her eyebrows. There's three baskets of ironing waiting in the hallway.'

'But there's so no point ironing towels and undies.'

'You'll iron what's in the basket or everything that's in the garage goes in the bin. And that's a promise.'

Nick's sitting on the baby rug crying while he pushes Lego pieces further in his mouth.

'Quick Mia, your brother. For Christ's sake I don't have time for this, I've got calls to make.'

Running to her brother covered in marshmallow spew amongst the castle he built with blocks Mia raises her voice, 'I'll iron this afternoon. I've got paint tins open and my brushes will go hard.'

'That would be a blessing.'

'But I wouldn't be able to paint anymore.'

'My point exactly,' says Mum irritated by just how different Mia is from her.

'But most of my ideas are for paintings.'

'So?' Mum dials her sister's number.

'I said I'll iron later'; thinking of the garage Mia breathes in deeply, keeps her calm, knowing regardless of what Mum says she'll return to the garage soon.

Mum places her hand over the phone and looks at her daughter, 'Once your father finds me a car this will stop. I promise you this will stop Mia. Now get your sister out of that bed. I won't have her sleeping all day. It's not healthy. She needs to eat something. When you see your father tell him I want the lawn mowed and backyard clean before the visitors arrive. Tell him I need him to go to the shops. At this rate I'll never have dinner ready for his family in time. I'm warning you Mia, best behaviour tonight. No fighting with your cousins and keep the kids out the way. I'm warning you right now missy, don't give me that innocent look, absolutely no trouble tonight, okay, no stealing the wine.'

Looking at Mum's black permed hair Mia kisses the rash on her baby brother's cheek and considers it best to let her sister sleep cause all Larissa does is spend her time watching Disney's *Aladdin*.

Returning to her artwork in the garage she forgets the ironing in the basket and skips the family dinner.

Term Three begins and from the station after school Mia runs to the garage and refuses to leave it on weekends. Apart from scouting materials and letting her mind unwind during long walks down the beach, the garage is the only place she wants to be. With Alice in her left denim pocket, her orange make-a-wish hair pointing to the sky, Mia tries painting every image out of her. On the blank spaces made of canvas Mia's left hand speaks with a voice her mouth doesn't know how to release. Her hand paints the people she's supposed to talk to and draws the food she's supposed to eat. Her colour flecked hair, stiff neck, aching shoulders and aggravated skin relaxes in the evenings when she listens to the Red Hot Chili Peppers on her Discman. Mia draws til her eyes can't stay open anymore and her body feels weak enough to collapse. Smiling goodnight to the faces smelling of turpentine she surrenders to sleep upon a blow-up mattress. Unable to feel the coldness and stiff legs she rises with the sun to mix pigments with linseed oil while her mind organises each move before allowing the paintbrush to touch the canvas.

Mia's guts know exactly what to do. The slightest stroke alters the entire image. Each contact between paintbrush and canvas risks compromising everything the image can become. Mia knows the risk involved as she loses control through the picture that becomes her within the garage.

The world dissolves in a kaleidoscope twisting shapes inside patterns. Holding it towards the light makes all the difference. Mia's school bag is packed with the works and writings of Dali, da Vinci, Frida, Goya, Whiteley, Van Gogh, stapled together along with sheets of recycled paper. During morning roll call Mia responds to her name but her attention remains absent. Observing how light transforms the appearance of an object's shape, tone, colour and presence she refuses to eat from teacher's fast food lessons. In maths she makes pictures from numbers on graph paper. Having read Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* for Lit, in class Mia draws Asher Lev's mother suffering, his father's absence and the haunting presence of their god, Ribbono Shel Olom. Drawing the tears Asher never cried and the silence separating the family she shades Asher's bedroom walls blue. Outlining Asher's evil hand, the *foolishness* it creates, the family it reveals, on her paper Mia exposes what unforgiven shame, guilt and betrayal feel like.

During lunchtime in the library Mia watches BBC documentaries on Dali and Modern Art while the school cleaner continues dusting the same shelf. She's called Tits by the students, who never tire of talking about how big and braless they are. Tits gives 'Loner' a yellow-toothed smile, 'With all your friends again hey?'

Not bothering to respond, Mia stares at Tits hairy upper lip twisting into the same snicker she receives from the girls in her year level.

Receiving money for her fourteenth she buys a box of charcoal and falls in love with how it crumbles under pressure, rubbing it slowly across the paper's rough surface. It can be smudged or blown away. This is what she loves about it. The impermanence of it makes her feel safe enough to commit it to paper. Mia wants to be as charcoal is, with the possibility of existing and then ceasing without a perceptible trace.

Babette, her only friend, gives Mia a gift she wants and not a gift Mum wants her to want.

'Hey Mia, hurry up and open it would ya. I mean Jesus how long does it take ya. Come on ya gonna love it, I mean fuck ya really should have one already. Seriously, all ya ever do is draw anyways. Seriously why don't ya use a sketchbook? Shit. I just told ya what it is. That's your fault man. Seriously, I told ya to hurry up and open it. What are ya doing falling asleep over there? Huh? You're

not gonna keep the wrapping paper are ya? Seriously, ya meant to chuck it in the bin man. Come on already, before the Butt Uglies take our back seats again. Man I'm gonna start pissin' on 'em if we ends up in the front of the class one more time.'

In Year 8, inside the art room, Mia's hand takes control of the charcoal and transforms the acid-free paper into something painful to look at. Lines meet to outline, and shades gradually flesh out Nonno Otto's face. Even in black and white he still has the sun in his eyes. His gentle features breathe through various tones, the wrinkles embracing his eyes smile and the cigarette-lines detailing the area around his stretched lips appear ready to let loose a toothy grin. Drawing Nonno Otto for the first time Mia smells the Old Spice she once splashed across his shaven cheeks. The sight of his image before her hurts. Protecting it with tracing paper she files it away in the art-room's storage cabinet

At the dinner table Mum explains Nonna Furia's descending from Sydney for a few months. Mum's face looks pale grey as she passes round more cold meatballs. The Bauta family swallow the news in silence. Nonna Furia, with her holier-than-thou white and partially fire-red dyed hair, is staying with them cause Uncle Pino says so.

Nonna Furia arrives with five floral suitcases. Like her voice the giant wart on her chin demands obedience.

1:00pm – Nonna Furia bursts through the Bauta's front door and sits down to a banquet lunch Mum's been up since 5:00am preparing.

2:00pm – Mia's sent home from school cause she's drunk, stinks of cigarettes, her dress is stained and the embroidered school emblem is missing from her blazer. Ms Bishdon shakes her bulldog face at Mia who's having difficulty explaining her efforts to remove the stains.

'One bad egg ruins the entire carton Mia. The rules and dress code at Magdalene High is to be maintained by every student here. You're not an exception to the rule.'

Mia stares at the woman's beady eyes.

'The cigarette holes and the smell of alcohol on your person is something I'm giving you detention for. In the interests of the school's reputation I'm recording this as a result of your inappropriate self-presentation. Your parents and I will discuss further punishment. I won't have it getting round that we have students smoking and drinking on the premises, you hear? Mia you're a disgrace to Magdalene High and your parents. Once your month of detention is up I'll have you attached to the straight and narrow. Reforming and maintaining young ladies

is my purpose. I'll have you know Mia, failure is not an option. Now, is there anything you'd like to say?'

Looking at Ms Bitchton's ugly beetroot face Mia promises herself never to let anything in life turn her into such a turd.

'Very well then,' Ms Bitchton huffs, clicks her computer mouse a few times and dials Mr and Mrs di Bauta's phone number. Regardless of what Ms Bitchton thinks everyone wears their uniform how they want when she's not around and nothing she does is going to change Magdalene High from being known, from Benthleigh to Frankston, as the Kennel. 'If dogs could fly, Magdalene High would be an airport.'

Nonna Furia receives Ms Bishdon's call and Mum gets into trouble.

Protecting the school's reputation, Ms Bitchton drives Mia home. Stepping through the backdoor, Nonna Furia, with a set of wooden rosary beads wrapped round her wrist and a collection of gold pendants hanging from her neck, turns from Mum to Mia. Without stopping to breathe or say hello, '*Gativa, gativa, Madonna mia Gativa, spirito santo, spirito Jesu, spirito Madonna mia ...*,' and almost explodes upon realising her glazy eyed granddaughter sleeps in the garage. Pulling Mia by her pony-tailed hair into the bathroom, Nonna Furia's teeth grate: 'I raised you better than this.' Nonna Furia scrubs Mia's face and hands with a pumice stone, lathering her black hair with soap and rinsing her body with scorching water. Nonna Furia moans as though her granddaughter's dead.

Mia's imaginary enemy Sad Clown smiles, watching her being washed til the bathroom doors are unlocked, steam escapes and what's left of her collapses in a white towel. Nonna Furia and Mum tuck her into bed. Her body's raw, scratched and clean like when she lived in Sydney with Nonna Furia and Nonno Otto while Mum and Dad sorted themselves out. Smelling of talcum powder and smiling at the glass of milk left at her bedside table, Mia sleeps.

The morning's sky is grey and the air's cold. Mia steps out the backdoor and sees the garage is open. Her colours and brushes are gone. A second hand silver Volvo is parked comfortably where her blow up mattress was. Kicking the tyre and kneeling the door, she spits on the car and exits the garage. Dad's smoking a cigarette under the back veranda, slurping from a mug of whiskey and coke. 'Volvos are the safest kinda car you can get for women drivers,' is what he tells Mia without turning his head to look at her.

Her work's in a pile under the veranda. It rained overnight. Mia sees it's all ruined and leaves to walk the Chelsea beach in her pyjamas until she doesn't care anymore.

At school she starts paying attention in class cause it's more interesting than the notes and gossip other girls entertain their education with. The late afternoons she doesn't spend at Babette's are filled roaming the streets for images and ideas.

At home Nonna Furia insists Mia start dressing and behaving like a young lady. Nonna Furia shows her and Mum photos of cousin Eva in callisthenics outfits, and at sleepover parties, Baby Sitter Club events and cooking bees – in every photo Eva's long hair, dark eyes and white teeth are laughing at Mia. A mole, the size of a five cent piece, at the centre of Eva's chin is the only truth her body tells. Mum's side of the family insist it's a beauty spot but Mia maintains a mole's a mole. Staring at Eva's Jennifer Lopez arse and boobs squeezed inside polka dot outfits, she compares it with her bony butt and chicken fillet chest and sees red. Nonna Furia continues like a record Mia imagines smashing about all the friends Eva has and how they collect photos of boys' faces and stick them in their diary amongst pink hearts and glitter stars. Nonna Furia and Mum want to see photos of the boy's face she's fluoro-squiggled hearts round; to check the great Italian Stallion's strong, handsome and Italian enough to be their future son and grandson-in-law. Finding it hard to breathe at the kitchen table, the plate in front of her, full of sausage meat sauce slopped on top of a spaghetti pyramid, she chokes on the sight of a loose strand dirtying the clear laminate covered table.

Nonna Furia is a challenge each member of the family tries to overcome. Mum doesn't do so well under pressure. Another wooden spoon is broken on Mia's thigh. 'Eva can already bake a cake that doesn't sink and stay raw in the middle. What's wrong with you Mia?' screams Mum 'All you have to do is follow the recipe for God's sake. I told your grandmother you'd have a carrot cake ready for her afternoon tea.'

Nonna Furia laughs, 'Don' be worry, I teach. You know Eva gon be eighteen in six months, gon be marrie Johnny, they have engage party an' eighteen party together.'

'In a few years Mia's going to be married too, aren't you?'

'What?'

'Don be worry, I teach you cook beausiful.'

Seeing red getting redder. Inside her guts Mia knows there's no way in hell these two rose-aproned women are going to stick a third-thorned straight-jacket round her waist. Unable to wait any longer for Nonna Furia to ask her what she has to say, Mia tips the gigantic stainless-steel pot of corned beef upside down and smiles as pink broiled flesh plomps to the tiles. Nonna Furia is silent for the first time since she arrived. Mia laughs in her stunned face and takes this opportunity to explain, 'I don't fucking eat meat and I hate recipes.'

The wooden spoon chases her to the end of the street, screaming in thick Italian. Mia's taking French at school and is thankful she has no idea what Nonna Furia's saying. Mia escapes with a sick feeling in her stomach; troll doll Alice isn't with her.

Having spent a few days at Babette's place it's late at night before she musters the courage to return home for Alice, clothes and schoolbooks. A family campfire's happening in the backyard. Sad Clown's there, he looks like Uncle Lucio, smiling, roasting pink and white marshmallows til they blister black at the end of his stick. Sneaking through the side gate, she sees Dad rekindling the fire with a handful of artwork. Nonno Otto's face is one of the pieces released from his hand.

She watches it burn. Watches it burn. Sees the fire scream. Feels the charcoal image cry itself to ashes. She runs. She runs through streets, across train tracks, over the Nepean Highway. Without looking both ways first she weaves through tooting cars. Running, running, running she reaches the rocks leading to the Patterson River's mouth. It's late. There's not a lot of light. She's not scared. There's nothing anyone can do to her. She spends the night remembering Nonno Otto's face aflame while waves crash against the blackest rocks she cuts herself on. She can't see the blood making her hands sticky just like she can't see a single star shimmering in her black night.

Angelina's publications include short stories in Muse, AntiTHESIS, Mascara Literary Review, Vibewire Youth Inc., and articles in VWC Magazine and Double Dialogues. Her three hour book was shortlisted for the 2009 Lord Mayor Creative Writing Awards. She is a recipient of the Eleanor Dark Varuna Writing Fellowship and a Rosebank Residency. Angelina is a member of the ongoing Novel Writing Masterclass with Antoni Jach, who is a Creative Writing PhD candidate at Deakin University and sessional tutor at the University of Melbourne. Christos Tsiolkas is currently mentoring Angelina with her novel Disobedience.