

The Dreaming

By Lauren Marshall, Berkeley Vale Campus TLSC

The dark night was humid, and the crickets were chirping extra loudly tonight. It wasn't usually this quiet; something big was about to erupt. Eliza sat at the long dinner table, in between her younger sister, Mary, and her older brother, Phillip. Opposite of them was her older sister Victoria, her nan, Katherine, and her eldest sister Marjorie. Eliza's parents sat at the two heads of the table. Eliza didn't like the fighting. It happened a lot, usually between her mum and her dad, or her mum and Marjorie. Sometimes it was between her mum and her nan. Her mother was good at fighting – maybe she should become a debater or a boxer.

Marjorie looked a bit upset, her face scrunching up as if she was running through thoughts in her head. She looked more like their father – she had hazel eyes instead of dark brown, and her hair was short and curly, like a lady from one of the cleaning commercials during the 60's. The ringlets were more like their mothers. Eliza, on the other hand, looked more like their mum – she had a rounder face with dark brown eyes. Even though she was dark skinned, she had a lot of freckles and long, curly hair that got tangled very easily. All of the children were quite tall, taller than their parents. If Marjorie lifted her arm, she could touch the top of the doorway. This was impressive to Eliza.

"About your boarding school enrolment forms, Marj," Eliza's mother began, cutting the 'medium-rare' (or so their father said) steak in front of her with a butterknife. She wasn't allowed to use sharp knives or any sharp thing in general, which always confused Eliza. It was a bit funny that Mary, who was four, could use a sharp knife but mum couldn't. Maybe she was allergic to the plastic handles. Her mother took a break from her weak slicing, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her fork hand, and then began to hack at the slab of meat again.

"I told you," Marjorie began, setting the cutlery down on the table quite loudly. It startled Eliza. "I don't want to go, and I'm not going. You can't make me."

Their mother inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. "You're going."

"No, I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm not."

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“For the *last time*, Marj-”

“If I leave, who the bloody hell is gonna look after the kids, Ma? Not *you*, I hope. You’re bloody hopeless. Couldn’t even properly grill a steak to save your life. And you wonder why us kids are always starvin’. Not to mention your bloody husband’s as useless as a glass hammer. Doesn’t even speak unless it’s to ask us to get him a beer from the fridge. You don’t even teach us anything about our own culture. You’re ashamed of who you are. You’re ashamed of *us*, and don’t even deny it. I’ve seen you throw out the opportunity letters, and I’ve seen you try to talk your way out of telling us who we are. The only time you care about our Aboriginality is when it’s convenient for you. Like to get me out of your hair.”

Nan looked up. Their mother sat speechless, but stoic. She had a very good poker face, Eliza thought. Maybe that’s why she was always down at the machines. Maybe they had a poker table there. One day she’d win a lot of money, and they could move out of the outback and into a nice city, like Adelaide or Melbourne or even Sydney. Somewhere on the other side of the country. In a really expensive or lavish house, right on the beach. ‘*And we’ll live like kings, Chicken,*’ Eliza’s mother told her once. ‘*You can have all the dolls and dresses you want. One day I’ll make good on my promises, and we’ll be outta here before you can count to one thousand.*’

Eliza counted to one thousand every night, but they were still stuck in their tin house on the edge of town, and they still had the chickens. The dingoes found a way through the chain-link fence though, so she figured they wouldn’t even have the chickens very soon.

“You listen here, Marjorie. You are *going* to that boarding school. You’re gonna get out of this crap town and *make something of yourself*. I don’t give a bloody damn if you want to stay. You’re gonna lead your siblings and youse are all gonna make better of your lives than I did,”

Their mother began to cry. Not a dramatic cry, though – she did this thing where she would stare off into the distance and let only a couple tears slip through. Eliza sometimes sat on her lap and gave her some long hugs when she did this. She might not be that good at cooking steaks, or cleaning, and she might not always win her money back on the machines, but she was a good mother. She just needed to spend a little more money on weekly food and they would all be better off. Maybe if she did some exercise, too, she might be a little happier. Sports always made Eliza happier.

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“Whatever, you old bag. I’ll leave when you get your act together.”

Marjorie stood suddenly, knocking the table. Eliza saw the ripples in her glass of water, and decided to focus on that instead. The eldest girl stomped out of the doorway, moving the mosquito-net that their father nailed to the doorway.

“*You’re leaving tomorrow.*” Her mother yelled into the open space, and Marjorie only slammed a door. The remaining seven people sat in silence for a moment, before their grandmother began waving a fork.

“A bloody waste of a scholarship if she doesn’t go. I wish she’d see reason. Back when I was a kid, girls couldn’t even go to school. For sure. She’s as dense as wet dirt.”

The rest of the children picked at their food for the rest of the evening. Eliza thought about what wet dirt felt like, and what ‘dense’ meant.

Later that evening, Eliza was laying in the bottom of her shared bunk bed, eyes squinting shut. The heat was treating her horribly as of late, disrupting her sleeping pattern and causing her to break out into a terrible sweat. Eliza took her blanket, beside her and already moist with perspiration, and dabbed at her forehead. She then reached over to her bedside table and grabbed her water bottle. *Elmsly Primary – Smarter Children, Stronger Future*, it read on the front. Underneath it, *Eliza Wilson, Year 2*.

The summer holidays were Eliza’s favourite part of the year, simply because it was a long time away from school. She didn’t like school too much; she didn’t have many friends, and

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she wasn't good at English or Mathematics. She was great at craft, however. She even wished that they did it a lot more often. Her mother told her that when she turned ten, she could start practicing on the sewing machine. Eliza wanted to be a fashion designer.

The dream was so alive in her mind; she imagined that she would live in France or New York, or in another big city. She would have a penthouse apartment and two little kelpies, one with brown fur and another with bright red. Their names would be Franky and Starchy, like two of her chickens. She would be the most beautiful woman, too. Her brown skin and beautiful eyes would blow them away. Eliza would wear the most beautiful dresses, that she created, and everyone would want her autograph. She would be on the covers of magazines, and little girls would want to *be* her, and she could have ten boyfriends, and –

Eliza's fantasy was interrupted by a stiff knock on her window.

She pulled the curtains, and saw Marjorie standing behind the glass pane. "*Open up, Liza?*" She asked, her voice dulled by the window. Eliza staggered out of bed and ruffled her hair, acting as if Marjorie woke her up from a deep slumber. With a hefty lift, Eliza shoved the pane up as far as she could, and set the lock.

"Whaddya want this late, Marj?" She asked, giving a false yawn. Goodness, she was so good at acting, she should become an actress too. She could wear her best designs onto the red carpet.

"I want to show you somethin', sis. C'mere."

Marjorie lifted her arms up to the window, and Eliza grabbed one hand, using the other to push objects and rubbish off her bedside table. Marjorie then took her other hand and Eliza ducked as she was pulled out of the wooden frame, her legs left dangling on the edge of the sill for a split second before Marj pulled her down.

"Is it about the chickens again, Marj? Because I already know that the dingoes have been getting' in real bad lately."