

## Little Girls

Rochelle Pickles  
Murdoch University

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*'They were your age,' my mum would keep repeating.*

*June applied the blush, commanding Cathy to suck in her cheeks. I'd never seen anyone put on makeup like this before. Maybe this is how June made up her modelling friends, sitting beautiful and still as mannequins. They probably didn't even flinch as the eyeliner was drawn along the inside of their eyelid. They probably blinked through the third membrane, like birds.*

\* \* \*

Cathy was going as a witch and I'd be a goblin.

I stood behind her older sister, June, as she crouched down to apply Cathy's makeup.

'Stay still,' June told her again, squinting to trace the outline of the lips.

I caught eyes with Cathy; it was impossible not to grin. Her face cracked open and June shouted at her this time, 'Keep still!'

We'd only ever seen trick-or-treating in the movies. Now we were going to try it for ourselves. It was all arranged, until yesterday when Cathy's mum tried to call it off. Cathy fought with her all night about it—finally her mum gave in but said she would be accompanying us, standing at the end of the driveways while we knocked. We were eleven now—so embarrassing. But two girls on the other side of the country had gone missing over the weekend, likely snatched while door-knocking for odd jobs—they found them dead in the sand dunes yesterday. Cathy complained about the terrible timing.

'Go like this,' June instructed, pulling a kissy-face. Cathy cracked up.

'You look like a fish,' she told her older sister, looking past her because the joke was for me and not for June, who was fourteen and did modelling and never spoke to us if she could avoid it. I'd been to Cathy's house about a hundred times, and this was the first I'd been allowed in June's bedroom. There was a strong scent of vanilla perfume, *Girlfriend* magazines scattered across the floor with teenage girls on the covers posing in various positions—hat rims flipped and adorned with fake flowers. I wanted to pick one up, look at the pictures of JTT and Scott Wolf and learn how to

look and act like Cathy's sister so boys would like me. Scanning the covers, I noticed a pair of white knickers discarded just under the bed, crumpled and tinged beige in the middle.

June gave Cathy a steely look and Cathy obeyed, pulling the fish face. When June was done applying the lipstick, Cathy smacked her lips open and closed at me with a *puh-puh-puh*.

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'You look just like Linda Evangelista,' I told Cathy, mimicking her cratered cheeks. Cathy lost it and June let out a frustrated growl, driving the blush brush hard into Cathy's cheek, scrubbing at her like a stain. Cathy went quiet.

June was scouted by one of Perth's biggest model agencies as she was walking to the Fremantle Library in her school uniform, eating a box of chips from Chicken Treat. I liked to imagine her, strutting the Cappuccino Strip like a catwalk with a mouthful of hot potato and salt, uniform skirt rolled up at the waist to make it shorter the way Cathy taught me. Cathy said her mum took June to get her eyebrows waxed once a month, her eyelashes were tinted black for that 'natural look'. Since June began modelling, she'd started having her legs and pubic hair waxed too. I didn't have any pubic hair, but I knew Cathy did—she'd showed me at a sleepover last month. It was thin and straight like the hair on a newborn baby.

Cathy had been *Nairing* her legs since the start of the year—her mum tried to take her to get them waxed like her sister, but Cathy started to cry as soon as the beautician smeared the first line of hot wax down her shin. The only way to remove the wax was to strip it off with a calico cloth and when Cathy came to school the next day, we all took turns touching the smooth patch of skin.

Sometimes I'd catch Cathy trying to do the model strut down the street, hoping she'd be discovered too, I guessed. June told her she wasn't tall or thin enough to be a model and Cathy stopped eating sausage rolls from the tuck-shop on Fridays.

'Do you want me to do yours?' June asked without looking at me. Cathy got up, her makeover complete.

'No, thank you.'

We went back to Cathy's room to change into our costumes. I ran some green eyeshadow across my eyelids with the applicator sponge my mum gave me, then smeared the green lipstick I'd picked up at Supré. I tried to stretch out my lips the way

June told Cathy to, then rubbed them together before an accentuated *puh-puh-puh*. Cathy laughed.

My costume was a ratty old black dress my mum let me cut up. Cathy was wearing something similar. When we surveyed ourselves in the mirror, Cathy decided we were both witches.

‘Witches, not bitches,’ I said, waggling my eyebrows at Cathy in the mirror. It was meant to be a joke, to make her feel better about what Simon in Year 7 said at lunch that day, but she looked away.

Cathy had liked Simon since Year 5. He was tall and parted his sandy blond hair near the middle like Billy from *Neighbours*. He hadn’t paid much attention to her until Cathy got boobs during the last school holidays—she returned to school pulling her shirt collar down at the side to flick a bra strap at the other girls, a ‘you know how it is’ look on her face as if she didn’t know we were all still in crops. There was a staircase up to the classrooms that the Year 6’s and 7’s shared, and Simon started to push Cathy on the stairs whenever he went past. Light, on the shoulder at first, then harder between the shoulder blades, making her tumble a few steps before looking up at him in feigned horror, mouth wide as he ran ahead of her with a grin. Cathy loved it. She coordinated the time of her descent down the stairs with the Year 7’s release from class, so as not to miss her staircase encounter for the day. I was only a little jealous—my crush was in our grade but the only time I got to talk to him was when the teacher took pity on me and placed him in my activity group for the afternoon.

I’m not sure what made Cathy stray from the usual routine earlier that day. She and Simon had an unspoken agreement—he pushes, she tumbles, he looks back, they both laugh. Maybe he didn’t push her hard enough today—only setting her mildly off balance. Maybe she just had a clean shot. But Simon was not expecting Cathy to shove him back the way she did, a huge smile on her face. He was also not on even footing yet, after he’d turned from having pushed her, and so he lost his balance and almost face-planted on the brick paving. His hands broke his fall, but not before a few embarrassing attempts to regain stability on the way down, his facial expressions priceless. The nature of the fall was undeniably funny, and everyone who saw it couldn’t help but pee themselves a little laughing, even though we knew we shouldn’t. I crossed my legs and covered my mouth, standing behind Cathy as Simon got to his feet, dusting off his skinned palms, beads of red emerging. He looked back up at her face, now stricken.

‘Bitch,’ he said, and limped away.

Cathy finished putting glitter gel in her hair and offered me some. My hair was out, instead of tied back like hers, but I ran a little through my fringe anyway.

We searched Cathy’s room for something to put the lollies in and Cathy produced a toy basket and an empty fairy floss container from the Royal Show. It still smelled like pink sugar.

Cathy’s mum was watching TV in the lounge room while she waited for us. It was light outside, but the evening programs had started. We stood for a while singing

*The Nanny's* opening tune—I usually sang it with my little sister and found myself missing her. I hated her a little most of the time, but I hoped I'd never hate her as much as June hated Cathy. I wasn't sure that Cathy noticed—she only bragged about her big sister. It didn't seem to matter to her that June was mean, as long as she was beautiful.

Cathy's mum looked up at us from the couch. After surveying Cathy's outfit and face, she told her she looked nice and reminded her to pull her shoulders back. Sometimes I saw her jab her fingers into the middle of Cathy's spine—her shoulders would whip back like a puppet, strings jerked tight.

Cathy's mum was beautiful like June, tall with straight teeth and wavy brown hair highlighted with gold. Family photos displayed June and her mum with perfect smiles and poses, a sharp distinction between them and Cathy, who closely resembled her dad.

Cathy's mum pulled herself up from the couch and sighed. 'Okay.'

The street was quiet as we ran down the sloped lawn of Cathy's house, half-skipping down the street with excitement and nostalgia for a holiday from the TV. The sun was beginning to set, the air grainy with approaching darkness. Silver Princess gumtrees hung bleached branches outside a row of squat brick houses, their paved driveways engraved with initials and dogs' pawprints.

It was 1995, a year before the serial killings would begin in the fancy suburb where Cathy would later go to high school, and nine years after the lady escaped out the window of the couple that had lived down the road from Cathy's house. The couple that offered girls lifts on Leach Highway; girls that assumed they were okay to get in the car because women are safe, and women keep women safe. If I had looked out June's bedroom window, I'd have seen its pale green exterior at the opposite end of the street—the house where they kept and killed the girls. But we didn't know that story yet; despite some eavesdropped murmurs that quieted on our approach, no-one told us about it, and we'd only been little girls at the time—terrible twos with puffy sleeves and bottoms ballooned by diapers.

Years later, when I did find out, I would think about June. June—strutting down Leach Highway on her way home from the bus stop, eating from a box of chips. Then I'd think about a woman stopping her, giving her an agency card and saying, 'Call me'.

We didn't walk in the direction of the pale green house, instead we turned right to make our way to the very end of Cathy's street—this was as far as her mum said we could go—we would start there and work our way back.

The only time either of us walked around our suburb was with our parents, but Cathy was also allowed to walk down to the bus stop on the weekends to go shopping in Fremantle with June. Cathy told me that sometimes cars beep at you when you walk down Leach Highway without your parents. I asked her why and she told me it's what men do when they think you're hot. Once, when June was in one of her generous moods, she told Cathy the cars were beeping for her. But she knew they were for June.

Me and Cathy pushed each other's arms back and forth debating who would knock at the first house until her mum called, 'Come on,' from the end of the driveway.

An elderly woman opened her front door, the flyscreen locked. We could only see her outline; the house smelled of wet carpet and cigarette smoke.

'No, thank you,' she immediately said, and closed the door.

The next house made us shout our names through the thick wood door, until a chain was unlatched and an older man pulled it open, his wife hovering nervously behind him. She peered out past us to Cathy's mum in the driveway.

'Trick or treat,' we said in unison.

'That's an American holiday,' the man said, and shut the door.

Our basket and fairy-floss container remained empty. Fortunately, the next house in line was Cathy's grandma's house, who did not have any lollies in the cupboard but threw a couple of packets of chocolate biscuits and Iced VoVo's into our outstretched vessels. I waited until we got to the end of the driveway to toss the VoVo's into Cathy's basket. Yuck.

More neighbours answered their doors and found what they could in their cupboards, unprepared for the demand of the last of their sweets on a Tuesday evening.

Two doors down from Cathy's home and nearing the end of the journey, we climbed the cracking concrete steps of a blonde brick house with a stretch of dead lawn out front. By this time, I knocked at the door without hesitation. A young man answered, he had a sandy blond mullet and large creases that whipped across his face when he smiled.

'Trick or treat,' we said.

'Ok, a trick then,' he replied simply. We were unprepared for anyone's right to opt for the alternative and stared blankly back at him. He smiled with raised eyebrows and turned, walking back inside and leaving us standing in the doorway. I looked around for Cathy's mum at the end of the drive, but she was gone. When I turned back, Cathy had already wandered into the house.

I followed her, stepping slowly over yellow patterned carpet, hexagons and circles joining and distant. The TV was on; *The Nanny* was almost finished and canned laughter spilled periodically into the room. A brown glass ashtray sat on a dirty coffee table next to a can of beer, a thin white line from a half-smoked cigarette trailing straight upward before curling and sinking into the stale air. I followed Cathy down the hallway, stopping short about halfway down.

A dull thumping sound had started, softly at first, getting louder—it was coming from one of the rooms off the hallway, their doors all shut. Moving slowly forward, I started a little with the shock of each blunt thud. It was right up against the door, like something was trying to get out.

'Don't open that,' the man called out from some other place. 'That's Pixie, she doesn't like strangers.'

Cathy was at the end of the hallway now and turned to the left and out of view. Quickening my step past Pixie's door, I reached the end of the hall where there was a kitchen on one side and a makeshift dining room on the other. The man was crouched down in the kitchen, opening and closing a series of drawers and rattling around the contents of each: screwdrivers, scissors, batteries, birthday candles, matches, a hammer, extension cables, transparent tape, masking tape, duct tape.

Cathy leaned casually against the kitchen bench beside him.

'What are you looking for?' she asked.

'My lighter,' he said, smiling up at her. Did they know each other?

'Maybe it's in the lounge room,' I offered, assuming he would have used a lighter for the cigarette I'd seen on the way in.

'No...' he mused, standing up and scratching his stubble before venturing across the room to some other drawers by the dining table.

I looked back down the hall toward the open doorway. Thud. Thud. Thud.

'Is Pixie always in there?' I asked. It seemed odd to own a dog that didn't bark.

'What? No, of course not. Just when strangers drop by. Like I said, she doesn't like them.'

I looked at Cathy. Strangers, then.

Cathy didn't notice me and began wandering around the room. She stopped by the stereo and picked up a cassette.

'ACDC,' she read aloud, promptly putting it back. 'Boring!'

'Hey!' he protested, smiling at her again like he knew her.

Cathy rolled her eyes and laughed.

'Aha!' he suddenly exclaimed, holding up one of those Zippo lighters, like the kind I'd seen my uncle use to light his cigarettes. Cathy and I exchanged looks: mine uncertain, hers excited.

'Ok,' he said. 'Come here.' He knelt down on the kitchen lino and beckoned us closer. Cathy and I walked to him and stood close. He looked up at us with a grin. 'Closer.'

We edged in, looking down at him as he crouched low, bad body odour and the smell of cigarettes stinging my nostrils. Up close, his hair was curly but dirty, his fingernails ripped and edged with grit.

He whipped the silver lighter open—the flame went thin and high. Was this the trick? We didn't move. Then the man appeared to pinch the flame out, pulling his pressed-together thumb and index fingers swiftly out to the side. He looked up, flicking a blue-eyed gaze between each of us in turn before releasing his fingers, seemingly sending the flame back to the wick. I gasped.

The man laughed loudly and stood. 'Well, that's it!' he announced.

Cathy slumped. 'You really don't have any treats?'

For a moment the man returned her pleading look, mocking, then reached out a hand and tousled the top of her head with his fist.

'You'll live!' he said.

Cathy grabbed her scalp protectively, worried he'd wrecked her ponytail.

'What's this?' the man inspected the top of his hand curiously.

Me and Cathy both laughed—it was the glitter gel. It had stuck to his fingers and between the small hairs of his knuckles.

Then the man was laughing too, saying 'Hey!', and suddenly lunged at Cathy with the glittered hand. He got her in the ribcage, tickling her like she was a baby. Cathy laughed, but she looked pained as she pushed him away. The expression on her face changed, playful smile lost. I stopped breathing.

Then Cathy turned towards the end of the hallway, and I heard it too; her name being called over the sound of the TV ads. *Maybe she's born with it, maybe it's Maybelline.* Pixie was hurling herself against the door now; it bulged with every hit. We ran back down the hallway toward Cathy's mum's voice, squinting at the natural brightness of the setting sun after the dull light inside. She stood at the end of the driveway.

'Hi Tom,' she called, waving vaguely at the man, who now stood behind us, grinning.

'I guessed this one was yours,' he called back. 'Tasked with trick or treating tonight, are ya?'

'Unfortunately.'

We joined Cathy's mum, heading back down the street. Light slipped below the trees, turning the sky grey and furring the edges orange like a low flame.

Cathy walked close to her mum.

'You want to do one more?' I asked.

She looked at her half-empty basket, then back up at the man's front door.

'Nah,' she said. 'Let's go.'

We walked the rest of the way to Cathy's house. When I turned back, the man was still there, watching us from the landing. Reaching down to pet a large black dog by his side, he smiled at me and waved. I smiled back.

'Bye, Pixie!' I called across the sound of crickets starting up for the night, lifting my arm in a wave. Maybe next time she'd be allowed out, now we weren't strangers anymore.

Three Poems

Frances Sullivan-Rhodes  
*Curtin University*

The first poem<sup>1</sup>

I am sitting cross-legged on the floor, staring at a ball of dust, going in and out of focus, and contemplating a sort of cosmic balancing of things. I have missed another deadline for application for an art competition.

Like the spinning of a wheel of fortune, the needle is currently hovering between crushing disappointment and acceptance that I have accomplished other things.

One of those things is stirring and starting to make small sounds. I reach out a hand to the plain, coarse cotton of the hammock and pull down.

Bounce, bounce, bounce.  
Boing, boing, boing.

The creak of the spring, reassuring, insistent, compelling, lulling,  
inevitable, ineffable.

Creak, creak, creak.  
The mumbling subsides.

The dust comes back into focus. The dust shouldn't be there. Soft-grey, softness. Why is it always grey. There is hardly anything grey in the house. Where do the colours go?

I have not managed to clean the floors today. The time got away with mashing bananas and raspberries with lemon juice, guiding a little hand on a wooden spoon and measuring flour and sugar with flowered cups, watching one little hand shoving succulent crumbs into its face whilst another pair of little hands wave in the air and gesture at the ceiling,

at the fan,  
at the dust.

I have sat on the couch listening with half an ear to "Dora Splorer" whilst marking essays on the Burkean Sublime with one hand and cradling a sucking head with the other. I have bathed little squirming bodies, dried them and folded them into clean, dry softness. I have walked and walked and walked with one bundle in the harness, one bundle in the push, whilst planning the artist statement that I didn't write.