

THE TRUE CONFESSION OF PAGAN EVENSONG- By Kate Forsyth

It is not often I wish I could claim the comfort of religion. I have always proudly proclaimed myself to be a bad pagan girl. How could I be anything else with a name like mine?

But not today.

Today I wish I could walk into the sacred dimness of a church and whisper, 'Father, I have a confession to make. Today I killed my brother.'

Today I wish I had a god to pray to, and a religion to promise me absolution.

But I do not.

I knew it would be hard. I did not kill my brother on a whim.

The day began like any other. I would have loved to roll over and burrow under my doona, and pretend the day had never come. But I could not. I had promised.

It was my brother's birthday. It seemed fitting that he should die on the day he was born. So I packed up my things, and caught the bus to the hospital. He was sleeping, as he always was these days. There was nothing left of the brother I loved. A shrunken head stuck on a charred stick of bone, wisped with hair.

We had made his room as bright and comfortable as we could. There were flowers, art-works, cards. He has been here for months now. My mother and his lover and I take it in turns to sit with him, to read to him, to hold his hand, which is blotched with black.

I unfold my newspaper. It is hard to find things that would cheer or amuse him. The pages are full of terror and death and tyranny. So I tell him about the cricket. He was always such a cricket fan, he loved any sports, my brother. Hard to believe this wasted bag of bones was once so strong and

fit. I glance at him. His eyes are open. His lips move. I bend my ear to listen.

‘Do you think I fucking care?’ he whispers. ‘Pagan, please ... just do it.’

So I do. I have to be quick. The nurses are kind and leave us alone, but it is their job to keep him alive. My hands are shaking so much I can hardly press the button that will send the morphine flooding into his veins. I sit and watch him breathe. The sound of it fills the room. Slower and harsher, until he breathes out on a sigh, and does not breathe again.

I walk out of the front doors, and stand for a while among the lavender and rosemary of the garden. It is very quiet. I can hear nothing but rustling leaves and a distant hum that is the city revving up. I know this garden well, I have wept here many times, watched by the white impassive face of the statue of Mary.

I turn and walk towards Kings Cross. I need life, I need noise, I need to feel alive. It is as if I have died with my brother.

I had expected to be torn apart with grief. Yet all I felt was numb. I could not look anyone in the face. I dreaded anyone speaking to me.

My legs would not work properly, they were stiff in their sockets. All around me clubbers stumbled out into the grey day, holding up their hands to shield their eyes against the light.

I passed St James Church and stop, staring at it. If a door had been open, who knows, I may have walked in. I was ripe for conversion. But it was locked up behind an iron grille, and so I walked on.

I did not know where to go or what to do. With the cold wind swirling dead leaves about my ankles, I held my arms about my body and stood, looking first one way or another. I wanted to feel, I wanted to be shocked back into life. Kings Cross is the

place for that. So I walked into the first tattoo parlour I saw.

Dragons and gargoyles adorned the walls, and everywhere were pictures of leering skulls, and crimson roses dripping blood. I knew what I wanted – a symbol of a rising sun.

Half an hour, and a hundred and forty dollars later, I walked out with a sunburst on my left breast, just above my heart. But still I felt nothing.

I saw, wandering the streets, a wild-haired bearded man, dressed in filthy grey rags. All around him other people walk quickly, not seeing or not looking. Normally I too would walk past, but today I stop, and wonder – what grief, what wound, has maimed him in the past?

He is staring at the ground. When he is gone, I look where he was looking, and see a quote engraved on the ground. It is by Bea Miles and says ‘I am a true thinker/speaker/I

cannot endure the
priggery/caddery/snobbery/smuggery/
hypocrisy/lies/flattery/compliments/praise/
jealousy/envy/pretence ...’

I stare after him, and feel something crack.

I know I must tell my mother. Oh, not that I killed him, her first-born, her son. Only that he is, at last, dead.

I catch the bus to Paddington markets. I knew she would be there in a whirl of colourful skirts and necklaces, her hair in a wild frizz, the air full of music and incense. My mother is a witch. And I don’t mean that as a perjorative. She is a white witch, of course, though I’m sure she is capable of casting a nasty hex on someone she hates enough. Like my father for example.

As soon as she sees me, her face goes still. She is telling the fortune of a girl with a nose-ring, and says, ‘Pagan?’

I nod. ‘He’s gone.’

For a moment she is motionless. ‘Was it peaceful?’

I nod again, unable to speak.

‘So,’ she says. ‘May the Goddess embrace him.’

I don’t say anything.

‘What about you?’ she says. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Of course,’ I manage to say. ‘I’m fine. I’m glad it’s over.’

The girl with the nose-ring is getting impatient. ‘I’ll be finished at four,’ Selene says. ‘We’ll talk then, OK?’

‘Sure. Fine. I’ll see you then.’

But even as I walk away, I know I cannot go home, I cannot face Selene with her eyes that see too much, and her relentless refusal to evade the truth. So I start walking, not knowing where I am going, and I walk and walk and walk.

For this to be a true confession, I suppose I need to explain a bit more about me and my

mother and my brother, and how it is I came to be a murderess.

Murderess. It is not a word I ever expected to define myself. The words we use to describe ourselves are slippery beasts with hidden faces.

Once I used to roll the word 'actress' over my tongue, and love the flavour of it. I had lists of words that I loved to repeat to myself. Voluptuous was one. 'I will live a voluptuous life,' I told myself. 'Seductress' was another. All these delicious, slinky, sensual words that feminism has denied us. And yet here I am, a murderess, a word I never imagined for myself.

My brother was conceived at dawn at Byron Headland, the most easterly point of Australia, and so my mother named him Byron. 'It could've been worse,' he always said. 'I could've been conceived at Rooty Hill.'

I was born two years later, and she called me Pagan. So, you see, it is my mother's fault I'm a disbeliever.

The name we are given is the mould into which we are poured, it defines our shape and our future. My mother of all people should know this. Christened Elizabeth Margaret Anne, and called Betty, she fled her life and her name when she was sixteen. Betty Courtenay became Selene Evensong, someone new.

But I am not making this confession to talk about Selene. This is about my brother and me, and why I killed him on his thirty-third birthday.

Byron and I were always close. We were tangle-haired snotty-nosed kids who were always given lentil patties for lunch. So, you see, it is because I love him that I killed him.

I walked until my feet were throbbing. I walked all the way to the quay. I needed to be near water. Today the harbour is green

and murky and mysterious. Jellyfish lurk in the seaweed. I stand and watch for a very long time. I am cold. I huddle my arms about me, and walk past the silver mime artist to the MCA. It is one of my favourite places. It makes me feel cool and hip and bohemian to go there, as if I am in Paris and living the life I always imagined for myself.

I am still numb.

I walk through the echoing white spaces. I come to a dark room and there, whirling endlessly, a white bell of silk. On the wall it says ‘we come whirling out of darkness/scattering stars like dust/turning and turning/it sunders all attachment ...’

Tears suddenly rise up my throat like vomit. I stand in the darkness, gasping great sobbing breaths. It is so fierce I am ashamed. I have to wipe my face on my sleeve, choke back my ridiculous sobbing, hope no-one has seen me. I cannot bear to look any more. I turn, and run away, pushing past strangers, out to the quay and

jump on the first ferry I see. I don't know where it is going. I don't care.

Hours later, the skin above my heart throbbing, my eyes burning, I make my way home, unable to bear anymore. The bus is crowded. People hang on straps. Teenagers in tight jeans talk endlessly about nothing. We come down Bondi Road, and I see the sea gleaming between the buildings. My heart jolts.

I jump out of the bus, and walk down to lean above the cliff. The wind is in my hair, the waves curl in, translucent as glass, and I take three deep breaths.

Slowly I walk down to the beach and leave my boots on the cold sand. The moon is rising over the sea. It is three days from the full. I find tears sliding down my cheeks. I strip off to my bra and undies and dive into the water.

If I was to invent a religion, it would be one of water. Here, at last, in the ending of

the day, I find – at last – some form of
absolution.

These things I have confessed to you, the
empty air, the mysterious sea, and now I am
done, I will burn these words and fling them
to the wind.