

Sarah Laing – Pussy in the Well

I could never get a squawk out of those bagpipes for more than a few seconds. I blew them one last time outside the post shop on Lambton Quay, but I only got a groan. "Young man, you need a goose," said an elderly derelict, his tweed suit mis-buttoned, medals pinned to his pocket. He walked one shoulder higher than the other, so it looked like he had been split, tongue and grooved, but not slid into alignment.

"What do you mean, a goose?" I thought of the one I had seen the night my father died, swimming in the lagoon beneath the Rowers Club, moonlit and insomniac. This man was like my father -- only more wrecked.

"It's what you learn on. Much simpler indeed, only one pipe. But I should be able to play these ones, did so back in the military. " He lurched forward, smelling of pee and beer.

"No." I edged back. I didn't want him to touch it, his lips as loose and quivering as spent pantihose. He would fill the bag with drool.

The woman behind the counter had Dolly Parton hair, but her breasts hung low on her chest. Her chin and upper arms were voluptuous. She raised an eyebrow at my unwrapped bundle. "My dad played the bagpipes the last Saturday of every month, in the park, beside the croquet lawn."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes, in full dress, but with undies of course. I used to sneak his sporran out of his wardrobe and pretend it was a cat. I called it Delia, and put it in the basket I'd saved from Easter. Whenever I stroked it I could swear it purred."

"I want to send these to Scotland." I dropped them onto her counter, and forced air out of them so they'd fit beneath the boundary-marking wires. The instrument sighed.

"I don't think we have a box big enough. You might need to buy some bubble-wrap. And then cardboard -- maybe you can collapse a pre-made box. We can't guarantee international parcel safety; you've got to pack it so that they won't get broken. Oh, look at this beautiful rosewood."

"So where do I find the bubble wrap?"

"I'll show you." She came out from behind the counter, her feet puffing over the rim of her pumps. "Is this Stewart tartan?"

"Yeah." I watched her unroll the plastic, remembering popping the bubbles, satisfying as a zit. She wrapped my father's pipes, once, twice, then sliced it with a knife.

"That's about three metres, I think," she said. "Pick up that H5, will you?"
I followed her back to the counter. The box hurt the crooks of my elbows and was dry against my fingers.

"My dad used to play the bagpipes very well. Dear old dad." She glanced at the tiled ceiling, every third rectangle illuminated. She taped the wrap while I flattened the box. "Now pass me that cardboard. I'm a singer myself."

"What kind of music?" I said.

"I sing in a covers band, at a pub up the coast."

I pictured her, hair in an upward soft serve swirl, and her breasts following suit, a wide elastic belt cinching a waist. I'd worked in pubs like that, listening to New Zealand girls channeling Nashville and Celine Dion. I had thought I would only be out here for a while, but it had been three years.

"Do you play?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"We have the best intentions, don't we. I always thought I might learn the flute, for when my voice gave out. I had some nodules taken out last year." She rubbed her throat, as though they were still there, tuber-like, growing underground.

"I was never going to learn the bagpipes."

"Your dad must be disappointed."

"He's dead."

The woman looked shocked. Like I wasn't allowed to use such words -- he should have passed away or gone to a better place. But that wasn't my father's style. He was loud, a prosecutor in the High Court, who boomed orders there as well as at home in the kitchen and bedrooms. He sang nursery rhymes before supper time, in their original gothic form. "Who put her in? Little Tommy Thin. Who pulled her out? Little Johnny Stout," I was Tommy, but no matter how much I told him I never would drown a cat, he wouldn't let me have one.

When I left Scotland I stole the bagpipes, hoping it might rob him of his bluster. I thought I might stop off in Thailand on the way to New Zealand, pour heroin down the pipes, and sell it to buy myself a sheep station. But an Australian was sentenced to be hung for drug smuggling round about that time and I lost my nerve.

It was fitting that my father's cancer started in the lungs, but I wouldn't have wished it on him. I had started volunteering at the SPCA when the news finally reached me, and it was better than the pub. I sat at reception, answering the phone as an abscessed siamese screamed upstairs. I filled in adoption papers for labradors. I attended to the man who brought his eighteen year old corgi in to be put down. He whispered so his corgi wouldn't hear.

"At my father's funeral we had a bagpipe salute," said the post office woman. "It was so loud all the neighbours came out of their houses."

"I never liked them myself," I said.

"Neither did I," said the woman. "We buried him with them." She giggled and punched the cardboard around the parcel with kung-fu chops.

"I wanted to make it back to the funeral, but..." Here I shrugged, patting my balding corduroys. I hadn't really wanted to at all.

"That will be \$149 for a ten to 25 day delivery time. And \$20 for the box."

"You're kidding me, right?" I said.

"Cheaper than a trip back to Scotland. You owe it to your father."

"No, he owes me." I hated her now, and the black roots that showed beneath the blonde hair. But I wanted to be rid of the pipes, I didn't want to be haunted by the bastard. And maybe he didn't owe me anymore. Maybe I could work at the SPCA because I liked it, not because I was still trying to prove something. Maybe I could become a vet, cradling animals' heads as I administered their final injections. I handed her the money, and the customs declaration and the label that I had addressed to him. She peeled off their waxed paper and stuck them on. "Goodbye, you old goose, you old windbag" I said, slapping the parcel.

"Don't call me that," she said.