

The Page of Cups Visits the RACV Resort

Kate Lance (2018)

Today I went to the cafe-lounge at the local resort to celebrate my birthday, and sat by the tall glass windows that look out to the sea. My mother was supposed to come too, but she has been unwell and rang this morning to cancel.

I wasn't surprised. Once a robust, independent woman, she's lost twenty kilos this last year. Uninterested in food, she says, but there's no reason the doctors can find. As if in cruel counterpoint I've put on ten kilos, striving to soothe my pain and rage and anxiety.

First it was fear at the thought of losing her, then fury at her sly games with the doctors, then boredom at the shuttered world of this once-clever woman. I sit with coffee in her lounge-room, listening to inanities, wanting to scream and throw my cup at the wall.

The resort has some very nice cakes, one of them a delightful strawberry and cream sponge. I have a piece and look out at the water, today the very definition of sea-blue, and hum 'Happy Birthday' silently to myself. A little bitterly it must be said, but at the same time I wonder if I can make use of the situation one day. Writers are ruthless.

I don't remember birthday parties as a child. I was a solitary, awkward, book-reading girl who did not make friends easily. Actually not at all, although I had high hopes of Berry Bordiss, who was pretty and could tap-dance and had real ringlets.

But she told me one day I got on her goat (which confused me terribly) and stopped being my friend. Perhaps my dreams of becoming a trapeze artist shocked her down-to-earth tap-dancing sensibilities.

Berry came back into my life a few years after she'd moved to a new school, and when we were ten she visited for a sleepover. I was thrilled, imagining midnight feasts and cosy chats. But after we went to bed I offered her a sweet for a midnight snack, and she said primly she couldn't eat it because she'd just cleaned her teeth. Then she started sobbing.

We went out to the lounge-room, where a woman friend of my mother's was visiting, and Berry perched herself shamelessly on my mother's lap. She cried she was homesick and couldn't possibly stay.

I was forced to sit on the friend's lap, wondering at the word 'homesick,' as I'd never heard it before, and assuming my sheer getting-on-her-goat-ness had given Berry a sore tummy.

Despite the time of night and her new place being far away, someone drove her there and we never met again.

Friends were not my forte, but I think perhaps there was one birthday party when I was eight or so. I remember my mother making a cake, and telling her about a dream I'd had. I don't remember the party but the dream recurred occasionally over the years, vivid and familiar. (I do find other peoples' dreams tedious, so my apologies in advance.)

I am walking along a gravel road over a small humped stone bridge. I know this is the European countryside a long time ago, perhaps the Medieval era. It reminds me today of the mythic scenery of Pamela Coleman Smith's tarot cards, but when I was a child it was simply a known, welcoming landscape.

The road ahead runs between a few rickety houses and shops and ends partway up a hill. From the left, a side road joins the one I'm on. I go into the second shop on the side road. It's perhaps a bakery. Behind the counter is a young man: slim, fair, shy, kind. We know each other and smile. That's all.

I thought one day we'd meet outside the dream, that this was a premonition, or a memory. When I was at uni at the end of the sixties a student tried to impress me by reading my palm. He said I would meet a man when I was thirty-seven and be his support, his strength, his helpmeet: the queen to his king.

The Queen of Cups, perhaps. I always liked her, but could never imagine myself so wise and lovely. The best I could hope to become was the Page of Cups—dreamy, free and nobody's helpmeet.

I never met my king, but when I was thirty-seven I became pregnant with my second son, who is shy and kind, although he is not the man from my dream. Indeed, I have never met that man or anyone like him.

Today I live by the mutable fishy sea and have my moments of happiness when I write, moments that those of you in lockstep with your helpmeets might not imagine. I also have my moments when I come awake in the dark, anguish suspended above me like the Nine of Swords.

And if I met the man from my dream today he would see an old woman across the counter. I would not mind if he had aged himself, but I know full well that old men do not yearn for old women.

He would look beyond my shoulder, seeking only the fair young girl he knew was walking over the stone bridge into the village. He would wonder why she does not arrive. I wonder that too.