

ENGLISH – CREATIVE PIECE + COMMENTARY

Whirlpool

It's hot and stuffy in the living room. You can smell your mother's expensive perfume she saves just for special occasions, clashing horribly with the stench of chlorine, from which she always turns her nose. It's from the towels laying haphazardly on the floor, ingrained in the lining of the couch, and from Anna's wet hair dripping onto the freshly vacuumed carpet.

Your mother. Out of the corner of your eye you can see her smiling radiantly at the camera. You can see the gears whirring in her brain, already thinking how the photo will complement the Christmas cards to the overseas friends. *'Friends' she hasn't seen for fourteen years and whom she cannot possibly know. This annual ritual to maintain the façade.* Your father with his fresh shirt, looking awkward and uncomfortable, doesn't know where to put his hands. Mostly, he's a man who likes to potter in the shed, away from mother. That's often how it is these days. *Hello, how was school?* Then he's gone.

He too has his annual rituals. He marks the start of summer by setting and filling up the pool, then cleaning it and maintaining it. Regular as clockwork. In the second week of December, he selects and brings home a Christmas tree from that stall near the shopping centre. Another ritual. A dud she says, every year, but somehow good enough to make the *professional* family Christmas portrait. And so now, he's at a loss at for what to do. He settles for placing his hands in his lap and staring ahead blankly, just like he does whenever he listens to your mother berate him about anything and everything. Resentment courses through you like wildfire as he sits in miserable silence.

And Anna, sitting on the floor, legs crossed like a six-year old. She looks ridiculous, fat and sunburned, in that awful floral dress mother makes her. *Thank God I can pick my own clothes now*, you think to yourself, relieved that it's been a long time since you've been told what to wear. *Yet here you are*, says a voice from somewhere in your head, *wearing a matching floral dress too*. You brush the thought aside. *It's being sent to strangers anyway*, or consigned like so many others to a dusty photo album in the attic. Returning your attention back to the photographer, you take a deep breath and try hard to ignore the suffocating heat. Through the window behind him, you catch a glimpse of the pool, lazily enjoying the cool breeze, the hose slowly topping up the crisp blue water, disturbing the tranquil surface with sporadic bubbles.

"Everybody smiling!" the photographer says with a falsely cheery grin, *just like everyone else in the room*. It's all fake. And suddenly it's too much for you, sitting and pretending to be part of something that should be a happy tradition. Glancing towards the door, Anna turns. You lock eyes, a silent agreement. You turn to the camera with a dead smile. A fake grin to all the strangers who'll see the card, then put it away, never to look at it again.

"Big smiles now, girls!" he says cheerily, but the faintest crease between his eyebrows as he readjusts the lens betrays his false confidence. As if readjusting the camera could make a happier family photo. When your mother fixes her hair for what seems the millionth time, you're stirred to speak.

"Can we go now?" A beat. You can feel her anger.

But it's your father who replies, breaking the tension from your mother as she battles to keep her composure.

“Course you can, too hot to be inside on a day like this, trussed up in your best clothes.” *She’ll love that*, you think to yourself, but take his words and walk out with Anna. As you leave, escaping the suffocating heat, you hear the photographer asking your parents if they want portrait shots together. You can’t help but grimace at your mother’s forced excitement, and your father’s silence. *What a happy family*, you think to yourself as you run to your room and grab your bathers, then rush to the pool.

Suddenly, there’s nowhere you’d rather be.

Commentary

The deterioration of the façade of perfect familial life was the primary focus for me in writing my piece, inspired by *Whirlpool*, from Cate Kennedy’s collection of short stories in *Like a House on Fire*. From the perspective of Anna, the audience is brought into the story through the second person and told of how the immaculate depiction of a happy family is being brought apart by the mother’s anger and hubris and the father’s silence. Experiencing this tension is also Louise, Anna’s older sister, who I chose to centre my piece around. I chose *Whirlpool* to write about because I related to both girls in the story, experiencing adolescence and family strain, as well as owning a small pool.

Also written in second person, my new scene reveals Louise’s emotions and thoughts as she struggles through the same “suffocating heat” as Anna in taking the family portrait, and desperately wanting to get back to the cool, relaxing pool. For both of them, the pool is a place of escape, of temporary reprieve for the harsh judgements of their mother.

Their differences, however, lie in Louise’s slightly more developed emotional maturity. A few years older, she is able to see the cracks in the façade a little easier, and is also able to form judgement about them quicker. She can see the absurdity of the portrait, intended to depict the exact opposite of what their family is, and she is resentful of it. Already, she is starting to resent her parents; her mother, for her inability to express love that isn’t forced by the presence of an audience, and her father, for allowing himself to be degraded by her. Herein, I chose to write Louise as similar to her mother in her resentment of her father, displaying how by being around her mother’s snide commentary, she is unconsciously picking up some of her habits. She views the Christmas tree as “a dud”, like her mother, and hates the chemical blend of perfume and chlorine pervades the room.

Viewing her younger sister as “ridiculous, fat and sunburned”, Louise again emulates characteristics of her mother through her judgemental view regarding the lesser status of others. However, this judgement softens by the end of the piece, where they escape together to “rush to the pool”.

Louise also deviates from her mother through her hatred of this inverted circus, with such a ludicrous photo of a ‘family’ that is falling apart. She maligns her mother’s thought that her “friends” will appreciate it, believing herself that “*she cannot possibly know [them]*”. This inner monologue is written in italics, like in Kennedy’s text, again drawing the audience in and placing greater emphasis upon their cognition.

By finishing with Louise’s thought that “there’s nowhere [she’d] rather be” than the pool, I hoped to encapsulate her growing frustrations and anger in the suffocating walls of her home, as she chooses instead the much freer environment outside in the “cool breeze”, inside the “tranquil” pool. Also exposed herein is their youth: the girls want nothing more than happiness and peace inside their home, and regrettably, they have to escape it to find it.