

Tegan Jane Schetrumpf



MY PARALLEL LIFE

I would be skinnier, that's for sure. We would never have left Sydney, so I would have walked to school every day, not by myself, but enclosed in a gaggle of pinstripe-pinnafored girls. It might even have been a private school which insisted that I participate in horse-riding or lacrosse on weekends. As a small child, I would have been allowed outdoors. Mum would have watched me, head cocked to one side like a nervous pigeon eying a bread crumb—I would never have been out of her sight, but I would have learned to ride that obnoxiously pink bike they bought me for Christmas 94. We'd have had a four-wheel drive with roof racks for just such an occasion, and they would have made time on weekends to drive me out of the city to some properly designated oasis of nature. I'd have stained the white rubber wheels yellow with grass, instead of them deflating, perfectly white in the garage, the metal spotty with orange-brown rust, uniform as lichen growths.

I think we would have lived in an apartment. A lush thing with tiled entrances and security parking, mod leather lounges and a laden wine rack, brooding like a hen coop. We'd have visited the delicatessen every day to buy shaved prosciutto and vine leaves, stuffed olives and Jarlsberg. Maybe not Jarlsberg. Mum would still have put her foot down over that because the Norwegians whale and she believes in responsible purchasing. But there's no way we'd have been vegetarians. We'd have smoked oysters with their wrinkly dark lips and chubby tubes of cabanossi on hand at all times, in case we needed to lay out a tray with dips and pickled onions and other assorted nibbles for an off-the-cuff gathering. Maybe I wouldn't have been terribly skinny, but running around playing waiter, offering plates to their colleagues and guests might have helped me work it off. They would both have smoked tailor mades. Dad would also have smoked all those cigars that instead sat so long in his study draw that they perfumed the wood of his desk. And we would have had one of those pretentious coffee machines that you need a degree and two metres of bench space to operate.

Would I still have been an only child? I think the apartment would have limited the number of kids. They might have tried for a boy if they'd been able to. Mum always thought Dad wanted a boy, when I arrived she was terrified she might have to try again. I personally think he always wanted a little princess. But in the city, his big important job would have kept him back late—hobbling down the stairs at the cricket ground, making seating plans, knees grinding underneath the suit, or upstairs making a quip with his boss as chrome boxes showered light down on the stadium. He would probably have been too busy to take me out for those secret dinners to the Silver Moon Chinese restaurant while Mum was at her First Aid course. He might have been too brusque to let me order the fatty fried rice that Mum would never allow.

Even if all those suspicions are true, I can't help but think it would have been better. I wouldn't have seemed so weird amongst all those city kids—there'd have been plenty of gifted children who might sing, or play The Beatles on the piano, or make up stories for

hours on end. It wouldn't have been so strange that a five year old could use six syllable words in a sentence. There would have been plenty of big business dads and mums who cooked French cuisine for dinner parties that you had to begin preparing at eight in the morning. There would have been plenty of paranoid mothers who didn't want their own childhood traumas visited upon their children by strangers in parks while no one was looking. Mums who made the canteens serve healthier lunches and who campaigned for the poor kids and the kids with ADHD at the Parents and Citizens Council. And there would have been plenty of dads that got sick sometimes.

And there never would have been a man on the couch, bent like a crooked letter S, who shook so hard with fever that he might start a bleed in his joints or put the crown of his tooth through his tongue. There wouldn't have been so many times we ate ice cream and jelly for dinner and pretended it was fun instead of knowing it was the only thing his ulcerated stomach had a chance of absorbing. There would not have been disabled racks installed in our shower, or disinfectant and a paper towel dispenser behind the bathroom door. There would not have been perspex wheels, big as a round of cheese, filled with multi coloured pills for different hours of the day. He would not have gotten so angry that time I was blotting my cousin's bleeding knee with a tissue, would not have insisted through gritted teeth that 'blood is dirty'. There never would have been a secret.

I would not have been the lonely girl, a tiny adult, adrift in a child's world. I would have made friends in the normal way, been fixated with television shows, and maybe even Barbie dolls or marbles instead of death. I would not have watched people peel away from us like browned and rotting leaves, damp and seasonal. My mother might have been able to keep a job, or make friends afterwards, instead of having to fight court cases, and deal with the fallout of the secret, all the whys and hows that acquaintances uttered when they emerged from the dark. Family might not have seen death as her calling, and they might have helped us nurse her mother and father

through their deaths in the year following his. She might not have blown, tangled and hollow like tumbleweed through a lonely course of years pockmarked with mental illness.

And I would not shudder every time I see that symbol, or when I smell hospital disinfectant. I would not feel nervous when people ask why I bruise so easily, or become defensive when people want to know why I won't donate to the Red Cross.

Tegan Jane Schetrumpf comes from the coastal town of Budgewoi, and likes poetry, philosophy and pottery. She is completing her Masters of Creative Writing at the University of Sydney, and considers herself a new writer. 
