

## On the non-intervention of gods, a winter in Melbourne, and Nicole Richie

*Aileen Armstrong*

One night in 2006, when I was lying awake, exhausted, in a grotty mansion in Melbourne, Australia, in a bedroom where a possum had tunnelled into the inner wall and was racketing around, scrabbling at chunks of plaster and cement, a thought came to me with a clarity and conviction I have rarely, if ever, felt since, and it was this: that all of society's failings could be summed up by the fact that we, as a people, were going to let Nicole Richie die, and that when she was dead, we would all, every one of us, be complicit in her death.

Nicole's death would be simple and glorious, as celebrity deaths tend to be; in fact, we would all make a point of finding beauty in it. There would be hyperbolic obituaries and gleeful grieving, and then we would be left to try to make sense of it, to see if we felt ready at last to confront what had taken her, to confront what was taking us, too.

The next morning I tried to tell Pete about the possum. He laughed; I had come to expect nothing less from him. Pete owned the house – mansion, more or less – that Tony and I were staying in. It was situated in one of Melbourne's most expensive suburbs, and our road was discreetly genteel. But the house was too large and costly for Pete and his wife, Leila, to live in and maintain by themselves: it was dirty and falling apart. This is why they had started renting out rooms to foreigners like Tony and me.

We shared the house with a few people. There was David, a young professional who liked to call me Your Girlfriend. That's what he called me – "Your Girlfriend." He'd address himself to Tony, gaze at him eagerly, and say stuff like, "Does Your Girlfriend like shopping?" "What does Your Girlfriend like to do in her spare time?" David was a Chinese guy whose name was obviously not David. He was short, almost thirty, hopelessly immature, and we liked him and found him infuriating in equal measures. Also living there was Air, a Thai student who looked pre-adolescent. Air's name wasn't Air, either, but it's what Pete called him. Finally there was Kelly, the teenage runaway who had found God. Kelly was Australian and lived down in the basement flat by herself.

Outside, the pool was stagnant, surrounded by garden gnomes; inside, the rooms were filled with Pete and Leila's junk. Every weekend they'd go shopping and come home with another carload of stuff: plaster of Paris busts, gilt mirrors, globes, Chinese lacquered panels,

polished brass fenders. It seemed clear to all of us living in the house – to Tony, Air, David, Kelly and me – that Pete and Leila had an antiques addiction. They also had an addiction to New Age mumbo jumbo and self-help manuals, to organic food and Persian dates.

They were also swingers. At weekends, they held sad, painted parties, and there would be the smell of gin, hard and glittering, in the living room. One night when Tony and I came home we found a couple from Dublin sitting and laughing with Pete and Leila; they cooed at us and asked us to join them. Tony and I were young and easily offended, and it was their oldness we objected to, Pete and Leila's wrinkles, and their tastelessness – the gold jacuzzi we had glimpsed in their bedroom. It was too, the couple from Dublin – the fact that Pete and Leila to consorted with our countrymen, people we had come halfway across the world to escape.

We tried to stay away from the house during the days, but it was hard to find reasons. I had no job and, after a month of handing around résumés, no money left to keep printing more copies. I was playing the waiting game, sleeping late, drifting into days without anything to fill my time. Tony had found work in the city, and while he was gone I spent my time in Borders reading newspapers and tabloid magazines. The magazines were full of thin, blonde girls in bug-eyed shades: Nicole Richie, Mischa Barton, Rachel Zoe. Everybody hated Rachel Zoe, because, so the story went, she was killing Nicole Richie, feeding her horse tranquilizers, hanging giant handbags on

Nicole's little matchstick arms and dressing her up as a Zoebot. There was a problem, though, a fact that seemed to make the magazine people angry. It was this: that when she was wearing clothes – lots of clothes, nice clothes – Nicole looked good. She had a soulful beauty and pretty legs, and she had a particular way of wearing the things Zoe gave her, a way that was at once cute and sullen, very much like Nicole herself. And so the magazines would hold back, stamping their feet, and instead of using the word *death* they would use words like *worryingly thin* and *shockingly skinny* and they would quote from her spokesperson who said *stress-related* and *exhaustion* and *good genes*.

On *The Simple Life*, Nicole had been the funny, bratty one, the trash-talker. From the start I had liked her, had sensed that behind all of her deadpanning there was a hint of a watchfulness that implied a nascent intent. But by 2006, when I became obsessed with her, Nicole had stopped talking trash. She had written a novel (*The Truth About Diamonds*), been busted for possession, and fallen out spectacularly with Paris. She had lost a lot of weight and had acquired a new, special smile for the cameras. This new smile was dreamy and regretful, and as the pounds dropped away and the people around her – Zoe, her publicists, and her father, Lionel Richie – began to speak in her place it grew ever dreamier and more beatific. I was moved – absurdly, irrationally – by what I had come to see as this quiescence, this passive behaviour, the impression she gave of hav-

ing suddenly relinquished all control.

My sister texted from Ireland: A heatwave! The hottest summer in a decade! Been on the beach all day! At night I sat by the fire, cold, miserable, unequipped for a winter in Melbourne. The boys played pool on Pete's gorgeous, frivolous pool table while Pete held court, boasting about his son the doctor or scolding David over his bad English. "You must listen to *me*," Pete, who was Persian, would tell David. "You must try to copy my accent."

Sometimes Pete's doctor son, Kian, called by, and on these occasions we all made ourselves scarce. Kian was boastful like his father, but much smarter, at once cocky and mildly resentful in our company. We preferred Sam, the other son, the sweet and cheerful family fuck-up, the kind of guy we all could relate to. When Sam came to visit he would bound into the house, tumbling his small son in his arms, and shoot pool with us, pass around beers. Kelly adored him, and Leila was suspicious of her for this reason. Whenever she heard Sam and Kelly talking together, or worse, laughing and joking, she would slam pots in the kitchen and curse in long streams of Persian.

In Borders I gorged on those magazines; I couldn't get enough of them. I learned the names of all the Australian celebrities and I read about their various diets. I began to have nosebleeds, for no reason that ever became apparent. Some mornings I spent hours getting dressed and, in the end, fretful and close to tears, couldn't work up the courage to leave the house. As the weeks went on I grew afraid

of committing some strange act of violence against myself or another – of stepping off a balcony on some mad, red whim; of slapping somebody across the face, of doing something, anything, to break this inactivity, to rouse me out of this stupor. I didn't want to *die*, but I did want something to happen. I was waiting, of course, for the gods, for them to present themselves to me, to sidle up – *There you are!* – and turn me by the shoulders towards my future.

And while I was waiting, I did not want, or like, anything. I did not like Melbourne. I hated the coffee shops, but went into the city anyway, on the days I managed to leave the house, to sit for hours over a single cappuccino and read newspapers cover-to-cover. I hated, and envied, the city's hipsters: the arty girls who worked in the expensive vintage stores, the cocksure indie bookshop guys, the handsome, smart-aleck waiters. I was twenty-two and had an arts degree from an Irish university. Who would want to employ me? So I waited for the gods; and on days I spent at home, Kelly came up from the basement to do her laundry and we would have tea with lemon and talk. Kelly had run away from home because her no-good mother had met a man on the internet and was about to give birth to his baby. Kelly referred to the baby (it was to be a boy, she had heard through friends) as "the brat." "He'll be your brother," I'd point out, occasionally. "He will *not*," she'd snap.

Kelly's main problem was that she'd heard the baby's father was a Catholic, and Kelly hated Catholics in the way that she hated her

mother and anything that was vaguely un-Australian. “The *Catholics*,” she would say (it was always “the Catholics”), “are child-molesting perverts.” Sometimes I grew bored enough to think about telling her that I was, in the technical sense, a Catholic. When I try to remember how Kelly paid her rent, bought food, existed, I come to the conclusion that it must have been her church that helped her, all those good people I never met but who rallied around her and swooped in to feed their own hunger for certainty. *Catholics are perverts. Only God matters. You’re better off without your mother.* They would take her away, to camp in the mountains or attend spiritual retreats, and when she returned she would be dreamy-eyed, ready to defy Pete and Leila.

The wonderful, and tragic, thing about Kelly was that she had stepped straight out of *Home and Away*, an Australian soap opera that is watched, inexplicably but religiously, by generations of young Irish people. Most of *Home and Away*’s plotlines involve foster kids, runaways, and cults, and Tony and I were secretly psyched to have stumbled across Kelly, this poor, intense foster kid in skinny jeans yearning for a bosomy embrace. She had light brown skin and light brown hair, and clear eyes and white teeth and a slight overbite. She was fulsome and beautiful, and I felt responsible for her, for what would become of her, even as I despaired of ever becoming anything.

David was in awe of Kelly, as he was in awe of Tony and Air and me, even when we were sour to him. He was also in awe of his office

colleagues, and would come home in his shirtsleeves to rave about his Team Leader. Yet when Pete began to pick fights with us – banging on David’s door when he took a shower, with a yelled instruction to stop wasting water, harassing Kelly over rent she’d already paid, complaining about the food Air cooked – we came to each other’s defence. Pete was becoming impossible, had begun to drop heavy hints to Tony about “going into business.” He, Pete, had discovered a Magical Food – a Super Berry, a Powerful Antioxidant with Amazing Health Benefits – and he wanted Tony to join him in marketing it. When Tony declined, the pool playing turned serious and Pete began to cheat outrageously, which led to manly stand-offs and muttered curse words in four different languages. We needed something to happen: a death or a fire, or Rachel Zoe – some event or intervention, something to gussy us up, cover our ineptitude, spread over the blank pages of our selves.

I finally got a job, waiting tables in a busy café under a bank, and then I hated, too, my co-workers, girls my age who could not pronounce my name but called me Mate instead. I hated the bankers I served every day: the silver-haired men carrying briefcases and the young, glossy women; I hated the Vegemite I smeared on their sandwiches. I hated Melbourne because I did not know how to experience it. I went to exhibitions, to the museums, to arthouse movies in the film institute. Always I had the feeling that I would be caught at these things, found out for the fraud I was. It did not seem to be enough,

anymore, to merely read books, or scrawl in a pad or wait tables, or look at fashion magazines or go to the movies. I needed someone to *notice* me doing these things, to lead me across the threshold into participation.

I think a lot of stupid, grandiose things in the middle of the night, when I can't sleep, and I use a lot of terms like "society's failings," "all of us," "our entire generation" when I really, of course, mean *my* failings, when I am really just talking about me. I don't know where I got this idea that Nicole Richie was suffering from passivity. All I know is that in the dark of 3 a.m. of that strange year, 2006, when I was living, for no reason, in Melbourne, something about Nicole's situation – that she would not speak – had troubled and provoked me. I was always surprised that Nicole didn't die.

*Aileen Armstrong lives in Galway*