

Snails and Veils

By Sue Stevenson

Its name is *Cantareus aspersus*, better known as the brown garden snail. Two of its species are crawling towards each other along a waist-high brick wall in my sister Beth's lush garden. It's an introduced species, though I don't know this until later, just like I don't know yet that my future son-in-law isn't going to run off in terror and divorce my daughter a month after their honeymoon.

It's 12 pm, two hours before Marnie marries Rob—the man who, to complicate an already emotionally layered day, I happened to have had a steamy dream about last night. I blush and my toes squelch whenever I think about it—and I don't wish to think too long about why my subconscious chose that particular person to dream about in this way. I would smack it if I could reach it.

I am hiding around the corner, in the little fenced-off part of Beth's garden, because I've started smoking again and it's not becoming for the mother of the bride to have a fag hanging from her mouth. Beth's small lattice steelwork table is a cute French café caricature. Next to me the low brick double-sided wall houses a garden bed and a lovely clipped pittosporum. It shields me from Marnie and her make-up artist and the caterers, who bustle inside the garage preparing



the delicious, expensive food they will later feed to us in the marquee.

The snails continue their approach along the wall. My mind has been racing all morning and it seems almost incongruous that the pace of my thoughts can exist in the same world as these funny, slimy little creatures. I breathe smoke in deeply and peer in closer to inspect this slow-motion stage set. What are they doing? They are approaching each other; there is now no doubt. Will they fight once they finally reach each other—at 3pm, at the rate they're going? Their

movement is almost imperceptible. As I watch them, I find myself relaxing into their world and mine slows right, right down. Just for a minute or two.

I can tell where Marnie is without needing to use a GPS. Just follow her voice and the bubbling champagne of her excitement. She is inside now, screaming loudly with her bridesmaids as they have their hair done.

Snails are hermaphrodites, which would be quite nice if you think about it. Not so much the having sex with yourself part because I'm quite capable of that already. But more the *changing* sex part. I've always wanted to know what it's like to have a penis, how it would feel to have this sticky-outy thing that thrusts into squishy places. Wouldn't it be great, when you're tired of being a woman, to switch?

My cigarette reaches its end and I light another, guiltily, because Marnie is calling my name in a long-dragged-out fashion that suggests that it's not the first time she's done so. It would be great to switch from being a woman to a man, although when I think about it further, if you're a hermaphrodite you don't really *switch* from one gender to the other—you're already both. Still, imagine how much smaller the gap between the sexes would be when there wasn't one at all.

I have a theory that there once existed another gender. Let's call them *mooman*. This gender, mooman, was one both men and women were attracted to and comingled with. But this poor third gender, stuck as it was in-between men and

women, was wiped out entirely in the ninth century BC by countless murders and intrigues from either side. It makes sense. You know it does.

I have no idea how long I've been watching but the snails, by my estimation, have moved about two centimetres towards each other when Marnie's call develops a top note of insistence I'm simply unable to ignore.

Isn't this funny? All those years when I used to call for Marnie with no reply and then, after the eleventy-fourth time I'd go outside to find her immersed, sitting with her legs outstretched in front of her, making dirt castles on the grass with her beach bucket and spade and soil from her dad's flower pots.

Marnie's dad. Alistair. That is another thought I am going to try my hardest to fence off in my mind today because it quite simply hurts too much that he is not here. This is compounded by the fact that if he was, it would be worse. I will go inside, attend to my daughter so she can marry her almost-husband, and live happily and contentedly, despite the hot slash of fear that threatens to rise up to the centre of my chest from its home in my stomach.

The next several hours are a whirlwind. When I see my child in her dress I cry, even with the veil. "A *vei?*" I'd almost roared in disbelief when I first helped her choose her outfit months before.

"Yes, Mum," she'd said, my up-till-now firmly feminist daughter. "It's beautiful," she'd said

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resolutely. “It’s *mysterious*,” she added, defying me with her glaring eye to disagree. “It signifies the time between and the time after Rob kisses me for the first time to seal our union.”

Oh, geez, what? I wouldn’t have thought the history of veils should have held up at all under the gaze of a feminist even if its fabric was calico. Marnie’s romanticism, however, had seemingly overridden the political history of those bits of lace. Despite that, history still records through a filmy Vaseline lens that veils were sometimes used to hide an almost-wife from a man she’d never even seen before, and probably didn’t even want to marry. Or it was used to shield her from evil spirits, or to symbolise a move from virginity to permissible sexuality. Marnie and Rob have been shagging for years. I even caught them once. But there, that is another thought to shy away from.

The veil *is* beautiful though, a filmy gauze that makes my daughter look elysian.

Marnie is called into the lounge room where the photographer wishes to take some shots, and I am called outside by the damnable lure of nicotine and anxiety.

It is astounding to believe, but the snails have actually reached each other and . . . what? This is

just too weird. The snails look like they’re . . . well, smooching. The two snails are caressing each other with their tentacles and doing what seems to be *kissing*. It is slowly sensuous and, apart from the fact that it’s revolting, at the same time it’s almost kind of . . . lovely. Ardent gastropod foreplay—I feel almost embarrassed to be observing such an intimate act, out in the middle of the day.

I return inside to another throwback to 1837—Marnie must hide in the house before Rob arrives. He mustn’t see her before she makes her grand entrance. Not simply because she wants to heighten the drama of her entrance, but because it will be, in her words, “bad luck” if he does. My daughter has put on her sheathy dress and it has apparently sucked her clean inside the chiffon guts of some of the more superstitious rituals of ceremonial wedding history.

Do I sound a bit old and cynical? I don’t mean to at all. It’s not that I don’t want Marnie to celebrate her wedding day with the use of rituals. They are like fun games for grown-ups, and I think that not only are they very important, but that we should have more of them. The problem is that the ones she has to work with are stupid and flimsy and have become meaningless. There

is now nothing solid behind them except tradition.

But still, for all that, it *does* feel exciting when Marnie hides away inside from Rob when he arrives. She squeals when she sees him through the net curtain of the dining room window (doubly veiled, just to make extra sure). I go outside, greet the guests who've arrived, answer some last-minute questions from the caterers and approach Rob. I am nervous. Rob is lovely but I do hope he can breathe inside a marriage. He grins, high fives me, pulls me into a bear hug that threatens to remind me of last night's dream. Oh, stop it, stop it brain, please stop it.

Still, while we're on inappropriate mental behaviour for the mother of the bride, just quietly, Rob's best man is hot. Am I imagining things that his glance lingers on me just a little longer than appropriate?

Those snails really did appear to be kissing, you know. I'm not exaggerating. Look it up on the internet. If you do, you may well find a beautifully filmed scene of a couple of snails mating to an operatic soundtrack and I defy you to not see something lovely, sensual, languid, beyond the slime of revulsion.

I move to my seat. The music starts and my beautiful daughter comes out the back door and proceeds down the long grassy walk to her future husband. She is beaming at Rob and we are all beaming at them. My beautiful girl. All this collective beaming of love and hope; surely it streams into them both like spring sun.

The service ends. We drink a pre-toast toast before the wedding party goes off to the city and several other locations to have many ridiculously expensive photos taken. After they go, I quickly check in. Yep, they're entwined, each snail standing up on its own . . . what do you call it? A foot? They're so close it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. As I look, a tiny horror movie ensues. A little arrow-shaped bit comes out of one snail and shoots into the other. Surely I must audibly gasp. To think this mollusksal interaction has been going on, all the days I have been on the earth, and I have never noticed before.

The arrow-shaped bit of violence is, I later find out, a sheath of calcium carbonate which carries the sperm. I discover all of this information while taking surreptitious glances on my phone during the reception. Rob's best man approaches me for a dance. Billy. He is 20 years younger than me but when things spark, they just do. I feel giddy way beyond the two glasses of champagne I've drunk.

In-between dancing, not eating enough, talking to guests, and gazing across the room at my daughter and her husband, I continue my just-discovered and untimely introduction to snails, sneaking looks at the internet, trying to work out what it is I've just seen.

That sperm sheath is called the "love arrow." Another phrase to add to the list of creepiest ever words and phrases that make me cringe, headed up of course by "panties" and "moist." I can only

hope that molluskical sex is enjoyable for lady snails.

The love arrow's calcium carbonate is the same material that snails' shells are made from, those round little backpacks that are their houses, their security. But so fragile a security. Beth squashes snails whenever she sees them without a second thought. Snails are able to repair their shells if they are broken. Not so much if the snails are squashed themselves beneath the shoe of my sister.

All of this snail stuff is certainly far from the most romantic kind of a metaphor that a mother could give to her daughter's marriage, and I apologise. Nevertheless, it's the one the day gave to me. My own little slimy-creepy invasion weaving itself into my metaphorical hope for those two, that their home and security will be woven from the same spiderweb-strong stuff as their love.

The night comes to an end. Marnie and Rob leave for their motel room in the city. The guest, the caterers, all empty out. My sister has now gone to bed and I am the only one remaining in her garden with its fairy lights strung up through the trees. Beth spends so much time out here, tending her greenery, and it shows. She hides shallow containers of beer in various parts of the garden to lure snails to their drowning deaths. Snails love beer. I love this last glass of champagne. And I love my daughter and her hope and faith.

I walk slowly around the garden, emptying out the containers of their beer. I return back to find the snails. I flick on my lighter and swish it around the garden bed. They've gone. I send a silly silent hope to whatever higher power may be that they will avoid the solid shoe of my sister.

There is the sound of footsteps coming up the driveway. I turn slowly and I know before he comes into view that it is Billy. He comes to where I stand and we smile at each other without speaking. The bottom of the garden, beyond the house and the fizz and the fairy lights, beckons, black-veiled.

Image: "[Knock, knock, anyone home](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [uw67](#)