

The Cleansing

By Megan Anning

To whom it may concern,

I'm writing this because I don't know what else to do. I don't want to have to write or think about her. But I love her. That's the reason why I'm bothering with this. Writing isn't my thing. I don't like to strain myself. Celeste was always straining herself. It was stressful being around her when she was in one of her moods. If she wasn't painting a wall of our rented house with a forest of trees that were multicoloured and alive-looking, then she was chain-smoking rolled cigarettes and drinking scotch straight, bent over a chunky old thing she called a computer, tapping away at all hours.

"Changing the world."

That's what she'd say at dawn, propped up against the frame of my bedroom door, looking as haggard as a corpse.

Despite everything she said, she wasn't stupid. I wish she'd been a bit stupid, to tell the truth, a bit less active in her head, where all the monsters lived. But I've just jumped straight in about Celeste. And I think you, whoever you are, should know from the start that I'm not writing for you. I couldn't care less about any of that. I'm not one of those people who has read many books, like real literature books, so you don't have to worry



about cottoning on to any learned allusions to other learned books. Celeste used to go on about how I should know stuff like that.

"Important stuff," she'd say.

But fiction isn't my thing. I don't know much about it. Why should I? I never studied it. Celeste did—or tried to. Just one of the many things she tried. But I'll get to all of that. I just want to get back to her. That's all I want. You always want someone when you can never have them again.

A bit about myself so you know who's taking

up your time: I'm your average guy. I've been told I look undernourished and sick, but I put that down to my Ukrainian heritage. When I was there, it shocked me how familiar their sallowskinned faces were. I like to draw. Celeste hated my drawings. She openly mocked me and said I should do better things with my time, but always in a friendly way. I liked that we could tease each other. That reminds me of the time we had a row. It was soon after I showed her one of my drawings. She'd started on about how it looked like the plans for some alien spaceship.

"Were you listening to techno on repeat when you were working on that?"

Celeste held a towel, having just got out of the shower. I wasn't in the mood to be mocked, so I told her she didn't know shit about anything, and then we stood face to face for a very long time shouting at each other. Shouting!

And loving every minute of it.

It's not often a guy can have a girl as a friend and live like a married couple for years and argue naked—but for a towel—and not be a couple.

So I'm not the manliest man, I guess you could say. I'm married now. No kids. We're happy. I love Trish, but I'll admit I've started to wonder about love since Celeste died. The forms it takes. If I had to categorise the love I have for Trish, it would be in the "Older and Wiser" box. The "It's What People Eventually Do" type. The "I Don't Want To Be Alone" sort. With Celeste, I didn't know I loved her when we lived together. She was like an itch on your big toe: you scratch

and scratch, but the itch is never satisfied. She would slap me if she knew I'd likened her to an itch on a big toe.

"Is that what you think of me?"

She'd say it with her left eyebrow arched and her left hand waving about. She'd be dangling a cigarette as though she were an actress in a French black and white film rather than a strung-out twenty-something working in a Moroccan restaurant for peanuts while failing subject after subject of a university degree.

Out of respect, I won't say how long it took her to finish her degree. But she'd tell you to your face if she were here. It was a sore point for her. She was meant to go far.

"She was supposed to be a lawyer."

That's what her mother had said to the psychiatrist. It was heartbreaking to hear Celeste talk about it. She'd get all dark in the face, and I swear sometimes I could see her eyes sag with sadness. Celeste would go quiet when she saw her friend, the one she'd gone to school with, smiling a big white smile on the news at night. I knew not to bother her then. We sat on the couch together and watched the news, but it was just noise to fill the terrible silence. Once, she turned to me suddenly:

"How can she smile like that? How come it's so wide? Is it real? It's like it's painted on. Or like it's plastic. You know?"

And the look in her eyes was like a confused child. I didn't like to look, but I always said something she wanted to hear. And she was

There'd be an elusive tongue in her cheek and a white flash in her eyes. She was always enticing me to love her. That's what she needed to be all the time—loved.

usually fine then. She would start wittering about an obscure detail of her day, like the ins and outs of a conversation she'd had with someone at the 7-11 or Centrelink. Or she'd tell me about the clothes a man was wearing at the bus stop. She'd talk as though those tiny things were as important as anything on TV, just as important as going far and being "a go-getter." She was convincing herself of something. She was making the darkness disappear with her chattering about the tiniest details of the smallest conversations with people she hardly knew. I didn't know it then, but those were the times I loved her the most. Those were the times I felt trapped with her in an art house film made by an obscure director, and for a while, the whole world faded into blackness at the edges of our little film set. I knew then Celeste was content with not being normal.

I just want to make sense of what happened between us. If she were here, she'd laugh and tell me to shut up.

"Between us?" she'd say. "What are you talking about?"

There'd be an elusive tongue in her cheek and a white flash in her eyes. She was always enticing me to love her. That's what she needed to be all the time—loved. But most of the time, she just wanted to be normal. It was kind of like her mantra. I can't tell you how often I told her not

to even go there, that normal is overrated, and nobody is normal anyway. It's all just a con by the powers that be to screw with your mind and keep everyone in line. But even though she'd agree with me, I knew she never believed me.

We met at university. I was sitting on a concrete ledge when Celeste walked towards me from the Social Sciences buildings. She started smiling. So did I. At the time, I didn't think much of it, but when I think back to that smile, I realise it was a proper one, you know? It was unguarded and real. It said: "Hi, I'm a fellow human being who finds you semi-interesting as a fellow human being. Would you be interested in stopping here for a while to pursue exactly why I feel interested in you in a semi kind of way?"

Sorry if that was long-winded. Like I said, I'm not a writer. Celeste would kill me if she knew I was writing this about her. I can hear her now: "Why can't you understand you need to show don't tell? Oh, I know why. Because you're stupid, Celeste. That's all you are."

I found her saying that over and over one night, or morning rather: it was 2am. She was pacing around the house, all the lights blaring, hitting herself in the forehead. Then she flopped back on the couch and lay there with open, vacant eyes for a long time. Hours maybe. I can't be sure. I went back to bed.

That couch is the only piece of furniture I remember her ever owning, and she didn't even pay for it. It had materialised one afternoon, dusty and used, on the back of an arborist's ute: "Thanks to my celestial powers."

I can still see her saying this with a shrug of her shoulders. The day before, we'd agreed a new couch was in order, and there it was, a special delivery: "From the universe."

Those were her words. I could see she had no doubt the universe really was the mysterious donor of the mysterious couch. The single bed on wheels we were using had become a pain in the ass. It rolled out from under us and away from the wall every time we sat on it. We had to jimmy it back into place by peddling with the balls of our feet.

The arborist had an apprentice with him that day. He was a young guy and took pains to explain that the couch would really suit his jam room. It was red velvet, with an odd, elongated back and square arms, giving it a 70s Ziggy Stardust feel. Must have been homemade as you could feel the flimsy wooden frame through the fabric and the stapling work at the back was shoddy.

"It's on its way to the dump, lassie."

So said the grubby arborist who had taken a liking to Celeste. At the sight of that couch, Celeste had wafted downstairs all sparkly-eyed and her halter-necked paisley dress trailing along the ground behind her, a vision from heaven amid that mundane afternoon. She proceeded to

sprinkle her "love me" dust over the man, the keeper of the couch. She had a way of sweet-talking people into instantly loving her, a knack for speaking to complete strangers as though they were old friends. Thenceforth, the couch belonged to Celeste.

Thinking of all the crazy things Celeste used to do, I can hardly believe she's gone. I guess that's another reason I'm bothering to write this. I need to make sense of how she died. The twisted old tree and that paddock. It seems so impossible, so unreal, so like a movie. I just can't believe she would do what she did. She wasn't stupid, but what she did is probably the stupidest thing I've ever heard anyone do. I blame it on the quackery, the homeopathy she got conned into by that weird guy with the ratty beard. What was his name again? Frank or maybe Donavon? Something dodgy like that. There should be a law against it. Samuel Hahnemann and all his disciples need to be called to account for their actions.

"Like cures like."

And then there was that family genealogy research she got obsessed by. I don't believe she really was related to Mary Anning. But Celeste got it into her head that she was, and, for a while there, she insisted we get out of the city every weekend to go to the beach to search for shells.

"She sells seashells at the seashore. Come on, Caspar, say it! Faster! Faster!"

"She sells seashells at the shesore. See shells shesells . . ."

When my tongue twisted, she'd crack up and lose it. She'd say it back to me at a million miles an hour, then make a childish face as if to say, "I beat you!"

I watched her as she went off on her own onto the rocks. She would stand looking out to sea, the wind whipping her hair and her skirt blowing about. Or she sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, prodding the blowholes with a stick. I knew she was half somewhere else at those times, so deeply involved in whatever was going on in her mind that she may as well have been in a parallel universe. I let her be. We were good like that. We let each other be. She'd call me over to look at a sea cucumber or a crab. She loved the anemones and would sit on her haunches looking at them recoil from her finger.

Thanks to Celeste and her obsession, I know Mary Anning was hit by lightning as a baby. It happened under a tree. Mary survived, but the woman holding her died. It all sounds suspect, if you ask me, a bit of Celeste-inspired-bollocks: especially the part about her being a docile baby before the lightning struck, then miraculously developing into Britain's brainiest paleontologist. According to Celeste, Mary's lightning-charged blood trickled down the family tree into her veins, which is why she was cursed and wayward.

"I'm not normal."

"Don't say that, Celeste. You know there's no normal."

It never made any difference what I said, though, and with that Donovan or Frank or

whoever filling her head with homeopathic rubbish about "like cures like," and miasma, and being tainted by the lightning's poison, Celeste didn't stand a chance. I can still see her wandering about the house in the early morning light, wearing her long cotton kimono with the cherry blossoms on it, the one with wide square sleeves that blew in the air behind her as she glided about the place.

"Like cures like, lightning cures lightning, like cures like, lightning cures lightning . . ."

She rubbed her hands together as though trying to wipe them clean, to rid them of some internal disease or poison. Celeste often wandered around the house at night like a zombie on repeat, drifting wild-eyed through the rooms.

Her and the rat-bearded guy obsessively made pots of green tea and spoke with hushed tones when they met on the verandah to discuss: "The cleansing." That's what she called it. When I asked her what "the cleansing" was, she looked out of the corner of her elfin eyes and simply said,

"You'll see."

"I'll see what?"

"You'll see when I'm better. You won't know me."

"Nobody knows you, Celeste."

She turned away and sipped her tea. I stood still for a long while just looking at her profile, pointy mouse nose, stringy hair that hung by her cheeks, and sad eyes. I might have been the person who knew Celeste best, and yet I hardly knew her. She hardly knew herself.

The gnarled tree was found split down the middle as if an enormous axe had sliced it open to show blackened, charred wood. A leather-bound copy of *Paradise Lost* was found by the trunk; Celeste had picked it up at a used bookstore.

“I’m going to beat the miasma out of a tainted solution. Out of my solution. Out of my blood. Samuel Hahnemann says you need a leather-bound book to become normal, Caspar. Like cures like. It makes perfect sense!”

The book didn’t have a scratch, but the surrounding grass was singed. And Celeste, well—

Trish is calling. Tomorrow, I’ll fill in the details. I need to.

I think I might be losing it a bit with all these memories. Lately, at the beach, I keep glimpsing Celeste out of the corner of my eye. She’s standing on the rocks gazing at the sea, her long kimono billowing. When I turn to stare, she’s gone. Sometimes I think I can hear her voice whispering,

“She sells seashells on the seashore.”

Image: “[Lightning](#)” (CC BY-SA 2.0) by [csaba ruman](#)