

Karina Quinn

## Water and Oil

It is Wednesday. Late in the afternoon. Jet opens her eyes without moving and looks without seeing. This is not her real name. She lies still in the sheets, warm. The afternoon sun has heated up her attic room. The sky outside is open and pale egg blue. Her eyes are focusing, seeing the ghost gum branches that tap her window. She can hear a low gonging from the bell that hangs from one of those branches and lies lulled by the sound. She reaches to the side of her mattress and finds a cigarette and her zippo. The click and hush of flame, the first drag, Jet licks her lips and exhales. She rests a full ashtray on her thigh and smokes, watching the gum move, until the cigarette is down to the filter. A last chemical breath.

I was sixteen. You had on dirty jeans and a thin black singlet, a leather jacket over it all. We were at a nightclub on Oxford Street and you wove your way through people and tables to get to me. You'd been watching me all night while I pretended not to notice. Music so loud it hurt. You leant into me, unsteady on your feet with beer on your breath.

'I want to fuck you.'

I tried to look older than I was and smiled. You steadied yourself with a hand on my shoulder.

'How old are you anyway?'

I thought about lying, changed my mind.

'Sixteen.'

I tried to sound defiant, experienced, old. You shook your head and looked at the ground. Looked up.

'I'm twenty six. I'm too old for you.'

I shrugged, leant in closer.

'So what?' You were drunk and swaying slightly where you stood. I wanted it over with, wanted bragging rights at school (after I'd changed you from she to he), wanted to know what it is to be fucked, to fuck.

'I'm drunk' you said and looked down again in the pulsing blue and red light. I looked down too. Noticed we were standing on carpet covered in tiny pink squares, the pile sticky from spilt drink.

'I don't care.' I did. Twenty six. Your face was already old. You fumbled for my hand and lead me across the floor through the people down the narrow stairs out to the street.

She moves the ashtray back to the floor and sits up. The floorboards look caramel in the sun light and when she puts her feet on them they feel buttery and warm. She stands. Still and naked in her attic, in the afternoon light, with the lulling bell, the ghost branches tapping.

'The afternoon is warm, I am alive,' she says out loud and for no one. 'I will not miss you today.' For that moment she is not sore or tired. Her thighs are strong, her cunt does not ache. Her nipples are hers and her belly is her strong and supple core.

Saturday night and the street was almost as loud as the club. Traffic; music blaring from open car windows, cat calls and whistles. Three cackling queens stumbled along in platforms.

'...so then *he* says to *me* 'suckitbitch' and I'm like 'suckit yourself sweetheart' and *he* goes...' (more cackling).

You were still holding my hand and I was still pretending I'd seen it all before, but found myself staring after their three sequined arses. Their long legged strides, the way people naturally moved out of their way. Queers everywhere. People spilt from clubs onto the footpath, seedy neon lights over everything.

You were staying at a friend's house in Chippendale and we hailed a cab to get there. Nervous. You asked me where I lived and I answered too quickly. In the back of the taxi, on the hot vinyl seat, you put your hand on my stockinged thigh and left it there. The weight of you, of your hand, pressed in at me. I thought about my own bed and wished I was in it. We didn't speak. The taxi driver's radio buzzed into the thick silence. You gave perfunctory directions, 'left here, then right at the lights, then straight' and moved your hand up my leg. I stared out the window and wished I could

smoke. 'Yep just here, right near that white van's good... ta'. I was waiting for the whole thing to be done.

There is no one else home. Jet walks from her attic down seven carpeted stairs. Rough under her feet. She opens the flaking bathroom door and the smell of must pushes into her. Damp and threadbare towels on racks, on the floor, piled on the toilet seat. A dirty white mat, wet, on the cracked tile floor. A clawed iron bath tub with its big silver shower head, half of it blocked by tiny worms of gunk. No shower curtain. Nothing between her and the cool air. More trees outside the tiny window. She steps in. Turns the taps hard. There is a rust river that traces the water's path. Mould gripping cracks in the off white paint.

'That'll be seven dollars twenty thanks mate'. He had mistaken you for a man with your leather jacket and short curled hair. You'd spent all your money on beer. Pretended to be embarrassed while you searched the pockets of your black levis for cash and muttered sorry as I handed over a single ten dollar note from my thin wallet.

'Thanks love'. He took the greenblue paper from me, gave me change. You were already out and at your front door. I walked up the three front steps to meet you, smoked while you fumbled with keys, menthol hitting the back of my throat.

I started smoking after I moved to the refuge. Me and the others were sitting out in the courtyard on beige plastic chairs and one of the tough girls offered me one. It was a split second decision and then a lie. 'I gave up a few months ago but I spose one wouldn't hurt, ta'. It was a Winnie Red, the strongest tailor-made you could get, and the first cigarette I'd ever smoked apart from that time when I was six and me

and Cara copied our mums, stole a rollie butt from a full ashtray and snuck out the window and onto a hot tin roof to cough and breathe in ash.

I took the tailor from the tough girl, borrowed her lighter and sparked it up. I took small drags that tore at my throat and held in the coughs. I wanted to make sure I looked like I'd done this before. I pulled it off. We sat in the courtyard smoking like pros. Later I went to the shops and bought a packet of Alpines. I'd seen my aunty smoking them, seen 'menthol' on the pack and imagined they'd taste like peppermint Steam Rollers. They didn't. But the menthol covered the tobacco taste and I kept smoking.

You got your key into the lock and turned it. The door opened a crack. You were about to push it all the way open, but stopped.

'I don't even know your name'.

'It's Jules but everyone calls me Jet'.

You turned back and opened the door, went inside. I was about to follow, but stopped. I kept thinking about my bed with its thin yellow sheets. Second hand from Vinnies, the only ones I could afford; but over the top of those sheets, the blue and white striped doona that I'd had since I was eight. That smelled like home. That made a warm place.

'Coming?' you asked as you took off your leather jacket and hung it with others on an old coat rack. I almost said no. Turned and walked back down those steps. Out through the night and back to the refuge one suburb over. But it was late and I'd been drinking. The worker probly wouldn't have let me in. It was too late.

In the hallway you pushed me against a wall and we kissed. Your teeth were on my bottom lip, grating, and I bit you back. The bedroom was upstairs. We climbed in the dark our feet loud and you gripped the banister to not fall. More dark we didn't bother with lights.

In my head I was already telling my friends the next day, making a story they'd like, a story that would make me cool. You a hot guy from the pub, not a twenty six year old woman from a Darlington club. Both of us a bit drunk, not me tipsy and you nearly passed out. Candles. The Pixies singing *wave of mutilation* from the tape deck. You undressing me slow, running your hands over and in me. Heat.

She puts her head under and stands. Still. Feels the hot water pinging into her scalp, runneling off her shoulders, rinsing the night before away. She takes a cake of soap, pungent with olive oil, in her right hand and rubs it over her shoulders and breasts, under her arms, over her belly and into her pubic hair. Then the insides of her thighs, over the bumps of her knees and down past her calves to her feet. She turns the cake over and over in both hands and lathers again under her arms and over her cunt, then stands again in hot water stream and watches the soapy water run between her feet and into the drain. Rust and soap. Everything is wet.

Nothing was wet. You pulled your hand out of me and spat on it. No lube.

'You're so sexy' you said, and I could smell your yeasty breath. I pretended I'd done this all before. You mashed your face into mine and moved around, moaned a bit. Tried to find my clit. I moaned too, because maybe that would help. It didn't.

'Oh yeah that's so good.' I was dry and it hurt. 'Fuck me' I said because I wanted it over with, wanted it to stop, but it was too late I couldn't leave I had to see it through.

It wasn't what I had imagined. You pushed four fingers into me and kept pumping away. We both kept moaning.

The sheet under me was gritty and kept wrinkling and bunching up under me. My eyes had adjusted to the dark and I tried and make out the posters on your walls. It was still hurting. I didn't know how to make you stop. Then I remembered that I had to have an orgasm. I pretended to cum like I've seen on the movies. A series of rising moans, then I gripped you hard, shuddered. I thought it was over.

'Now do me.' I was embarrassed, didn't know what to do. I kissed you for a while. You were on your back and I was lying down one side of you. The sheet had come off half the mattress and I was lying on sticky foam. I fumbled over your body with my hands. You were quiet you didn't respond.

'Oh yeah,' I said (I learnt this from the telly) 'you're so hot' and I moaned again. Nothing. Nothing. You'd fallen asleep and I turned, relieved. Stopped.

I put my head on the pillow and kept making the story to tell my friends down the back of the oval where we smoked and rubbed coconut oil into our legs to go brown.

This is what I will say:

'So anyway, ummm, he was really cute and he really liked me. I couldn't believe it when he asked me to come back to his place. And when we got there I told him it was my first time and oh my god he hugged me and said he was really, kinda, *honoured* to be my first, and I felt like I'd known him all my life.' I will pause here to light an Alpine and take a long drag. 'And he was so gentle with me and I came about four times and it was fucking amazing!!!' And Kelly will be jealous because now she's the last to lose her virginity and I beat her to it.

The pillow was damp and musty. We were lying back to back and I pulled some of the thin red blanket that was covering you onto me. I slept and hoped for morning.

I woke suddenly into early dawn light. A recurring dream hung on me, a muffled dread, worse because I'd woken from it into a room I didn't know, with nothing familiar to pull me from it completely. And this was how it went:

I was in a room with a door and a window and nothing else, but the floor kept tilting up and away and I staggered all over the place and fell repeatedly. At some point some of my teeth were knocked out and I knew in the dream that this was terrible. I could taste the metal tang of blood and put my tongue into the fleshy red holes. I knew I had to find the missing teeth, so I dropped to my knees on the tilting floor. I ran my hands out in front of me, sweeping over the floor, then inched forward on my knees and swept again. I kept going. Eventually I found them, small white pebbles smooth with sharp edges. I snapped them back into my gums.

This time, though, the dream had changed. I couldn't find my teeth. I was frantic with searching. I was crying and my tears mixed with the tacky stream of blood and saliva spooling from my jaw and down over my chin. The tilting floor was slippery with fluid. Blood and spit and tears.

This is when I woke up; before I'd found my teeth, missing. I pushed my tongue around my mouth expecting salty spit and gaping holes but I was intact. I wiped my hands across my cheeks and then over my chin, expecting tears and blood and spit, but there was nothing. Just dry skin, a few pimply bumps. You were still passed out next to me, twisted in the sheets, your brown skin gleaming blueish in the early

morning light. I was careful not to wake you as I got up off the mattress balanced on milk crates and boards, and searched in the blue half light for my clothes.

There is a small brown pot with a black lid at one end of the bath. She picks it up and tips out some of the coarse browngrey powder inside. The jar is heavy in her hands. She likes the weight of it. Adzuki beans. Crushed. (She makes them herself: buys the beans from the Turkish nut shop on Marrickville Road, crushes them in her spice grinder, loves their earthen smell when she takes the lid off and scoops the powder into those little jars.) She adds a small trickle of water to the powder in the cup of her hand and makes a thick paste. She rubs the paste between her hands, then puts them both to her face. She scrubs at her cheeks and forehead and chin, then down and around her neck.

The crushed beans are hard and push into her skin. She is stripped. She turns her face into the water and the little grains wash away, down to the rust river between her feet. Her face is stinging and raw, and later when she looks in the mirror it will be red and scrubbed clean. The water has been on so long that it's lukewarm and now she turns it off. The searing wet heat is gone. She steps dripping onto the waterlogged bath mat and takes one of the thin towels from the rack. Dries herself. Puts it back. Goes back through the door and up the seven dark stairs, into her eyrie, her attic room.

Back down the still dark stairs and out into the morning I stepped in my doc boots and dress. My stockings balled up in my hand. If I'd stayed to put them on you might have woken up and I didn't know your name. I walked quickly the twenty five minutes back to the refuge, my legs and arms pimply with cold. You were my first and it wasn't like I'd imagined it. It wasn't like the telly or the movies. I was sore and cold. I

will never see you again, and if I do I will pretend not to know you. (I did see you again, four years later at a pool comp in Newtown. You were still wearing black levis and a leather jacket. I had stopped wearing dresses. I pretended not to know you and you didn't know me. We ended up playing each other. You gave me vague smiles when you passed over the cue, then returned to your table to smoke and gulp beer between shots.) I didn't know your name and I could feel the beginning of a creeping shame.

The sun has moved further down in the sky but her room is warmed through. She goes to her wardrobe to choose her clothes for the next few hours. They will be hers. No one will take them off her to leave her naked in the middle of someone else's room. She pulls out torn jeans and a white t-shirt. It has a bright pink gun that sits across her breasts, and above it in thick black capitals the words TOUCH ME. Twelve hole steel capped docs. Her left foot and then her right, in and laced up tight. Jet moves over to the windowsill and picks up a small jar of wax. Screws open the lid and dips one finger into the sticky white paste. It smells of coconut. She wipes the paste onto her palm and rubs both hands together, then pushes the stuff through her short bleached hair. There is a shard of mirror next to her bed and she picks it up. Takes black liner and runs it around both eyes. She is ready. There are hours before she goes back there, to those rooms. She is not there yet. It is still daylight there is still time.

I hadn't thought of you, that night, for years. But I was in a bookshop on King Street last weekend and saw *The Lover*. I bought it for its cover I think. Oil pastels, greens and pinks and reds, a naked woman her skin the colour of peaches curled on the front. I took it to Correlli's and ordered coffee and a sticky sultana bun.

There is time to be out in the day. She leaves her attic room and goes down the dark stairs and onto the street. There is a cool wind and she wraps her bare arms around herself to keep herself warm. Walks. Treads with her boots along the footpath her head up. Eyes open. Sun on the back of her neck.

I read the whole thing in two hours. Engulfed. The girl in the silk dress and man's hat. Those gold lamé shoes. And how it did not hurt even though there was blood. That she desired him. I sat there in the Sunday morning Newtown buzz and while I drank strong sweet coffee and read, I felt sadness clutch at my chest and throat. I run at things. I refuse my own newness. I never told you that I hadn't climbed in bed with a stranger before. That the only people I had slept next to were my mother and my sister. Almost mercenary, I had made the story in my head ready for the next day. Like I had nothing precious. Nothing worth keeping, and everything to give away.

Jet turns back. She goes through her front door and up the stairs to her room. Picks up a bag and starts to fill it. Make up, fishnet stockings, black heels, black lace teddy, short red skirt, long blonde wig, the padlock for her locker. She leaves her boots and jeans and t-shirt on for as long as she can. It is dusk. It is time. She makes sure her ipod is charged for between times when she smokes and drinks coffee and listens to music. She doesn't talk to the other girls. Sometimes she folds the freshly washed towels. Sometimes she reads. Sometimes she sleeps. She does not think about desire.

I do not think about desire. He is on top of me rutting away. 'Oh yeah baby, oh yeah, take it, take it all'. I remember to moan. He's been going for fifteen minutes and it's starting to hurt. I use an old trick, and reach around to push one finger into his anus.

He cums. Rolls off me, peels the condom off and chucks it on the floor. I stand and pull on my nylon lace knickers and matching teddy. Adjust my wig in the mirrors that run around the walls of the room. He has his pants on and is buttoning his shirt. I step into my skirt and then push my feet back into my heels. He doesn't say anything, leaves. The money is already on the bedside table. You have to get the money off them first.

I pick the condom up off the floor, thin and sticky between my fingers, and drop it into the bin beside the bed. I make the bed. Get fresh towels from the cupboard and lay them on the corner like they do in hotels. The owner likes it that way, likes it to look classy. I go into the ensuite, turn on the tap, and wash the shit and cum off my hands. I pull down my undies and wipe myself with a damp washer. Then I take the damp towel he left on the floor and use it to wipe down the shower cubicle and basin. Washer and towel into the basket in the corner. When it's full later in the night I will take the basket to the laundry in the back of the house and do a load. We all have to take responsibility for keeping things clean.

I pick up the money from the bedside table, pull the door closed and walk along the hall to the stairs, my heels catching in the thick carpet pile. The stairs are steep and I hold onto the banister as I go down. I hate walking in heels. The receptionist is on the phone, and smiles at me as she takes the money.

'...and then we have Candy, she's blonde, busty and nineteen. Very new. If you prefer a more experienced lady, Lucy is twenty three and knows how to please...' I am Lucy at work. The receptionist gives me a wink, keeps listing girls that do not exist. I will get my forty percent split at the end of the night.

Walking back up the stairs I remember my interview with the owner. I was so tired of working in cafes for ten dollars an hour that forty percent sounded good. If I could get enough clients on each shift I'd only have to work a few nights a week. I had plans for the rest of my time. I would read and apply for uni and go to the movies. I'd teach myself to make soap from my mother's recipe and have a stall at Glebe market on Saturdays. Olive oil, lye, rain water, roughly chopped lavender sprigs for scent. I would make soap for myself and for others, and in that way remember the woman that birthed me. And every morning when I rolled that soap over and over in my hands, lathering in the scalding heat, so hot the water feels cold, that pungent olive oil smell would mean she was there.

She was not there, and she is not here. I am not there. I am not here.

## **Author Bio**

Karina Quinn is an emerging writer working in queer theory, fictocriticism, and post-structuralist and feminist theories of the body, subjectivity, and self. She writes short fiction, poetry, and fictocriticism, and is currently writing her PhD titled 'this body, written' at La Trobe University, Melbourne.

Citation: Quinn, K. 2012. 'Water and Oil', *Polari Journal*, 5 (April 2012), [www.polarijournal.com/resources/Quinn-Water&Oil.pdf](http://www.polarijournal.com/resources/Quinn-Water&Oil.pdf) (accessed <insert date>).