

University of Canberra

Jessica Rose

Staple us Together

Jessica Rose passed away just before the AAWP conference in 2013 where she was due to present this story. We publish this with the permission of Jess's family, and as a tribute to the memory of a kind and generous colleague, student and friend. We include below an introduction from Jess's mother, Ruth.

Introduction by Ruth Leslie-Rose

Jessica grew up in Darwin. We moved there when she was 8 years old. She was a little frightened of living in Darwin at first, as she imagined a city surrounded by crocodiles! For the first month or so, we were without TV and Jess discovered reading with a passion. By the time she was twelve years old, Jess knew she wanted to be a writer. Her inspiration was the Nancy Drew series. She loved those stories.

Darwin is a small city with strong multicultural homogeneity. Jess was shocked, when she first moved to Canberra as an undergraduate student, at how different social interactions were, in other places. Her stories reflect her experiences in life and her interest in how people navigate cultural tensions, especially when strong cultural mores are transplanted in a new country.

Abstract:

A family has been stapled together by influences other than love. After several years of familial and cultural pressure, a young woman is successfully advertised for marriage in the classifieds, and her new husband and ready-made child come to live with her in Melbourne. Their reasons for marriage are practical. She is young and without a husband; he has a six-year-old daughter, and has been widowed. They try, and fail, and try again to come to know each other: to live side by side and find some happiness.

This observation of their relationship is not judgemental. Love-based marriage has only been dominant in western culture for the last two hundred years, since the age of the Enlightenment. Arranged or assisted marriage is still quite common, and many cultures practice this form of union.

While I have written a novel (from which this segment is an extract) about a Sri Lankan Australian family, I have been simultaneously addressing the ethics of storytelling when the voice/s are categorically different from your own. Whose story is it? Who can tell it? Who is silenced in the telling? These questions often appear to

be sidelined as uncomfortable and taboo, and so they resist examination. I ask: is it possible to staple art and ethics together?

Biographical note:

Jessica Rose was a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra exploring the ethics of storytelling and has recently completed interviews with nine authors about ethics and their practice. She had written a novel about arranged marriage within the context of a Sri Lankan Australian family and in 2012 she was awarded the CAL Fellowship for Redrafting Residency with Charlotte Wood at Varuna The Writer's House for her PhD manuscript: *Staple us Together*.

Staple us Together

Avanthi sips her tea, staring out into the garden. It's the first day she has seen bees, and she's pleased: it means summer will be here soon. She's had enough of the never-ending cool weather. Nimali appears to be coming down with a cold: another sign of the changing season, and she is fast asleep although it is three in the afternoon. Avanthi knows it's wrong, but she's glad her stepdaughter is stuck in bed. Perhaps in these quiet moments Lalith will pay more attention to her and actually try to make this marriage work. She lifts the mug to her lips and breathes in the steam, watching him shift in his seat.

'Do you think we've enrolled her correctly?' His cup sits untouched.

She sighs. 'Yes.'

He leans forward, tapping his fingers on the glass table top. 'But what if we haven't? What do I – we – do if she doesn't get into that high school?'

'Don't worry so much. She's on the list.' She tries not to frown. 'And if it doesn't work, we'll figure something else out. There are lots of good places.' She takes another sip, willing him to initiate a different conversation: one that doesn't involve his daughter.

The neighbour's cat leaps onto the fence, balancing with ease. She watches it study them with half-lidded eyes.

'It's very important,' he insists, hunching over in his chair.

Her foot involuntarily jerks. 'She's not dumb, Lalith. She'll thrive anywhere.'

He scrunches a hand through his hair. 'I know that. I just –'

'You want her to have the best.' The cat drops onto the lawn, stretching out across the grass. 'It's okay. I get it.'

He picks up his mug and leans back. But rather than drinking, he rests the mug on his leg.

She studies him: noting this is one of the rare times she's seen him looking dishevelled. 'You know, there's this thing a lot of Melbourne people do that's always bothered me.'

'You're a Melbourne person.' He flicks an ant off his arm.

'Other Melbourne people.'

He purses his lips. 'Fine.'

She holds the tea beneath her nose, letting it steady her. 'When you meet someone new – even if they're now in their thirties and forties – they'll ask you what school you went to.' She waves a fly from her face. 'Like it *defines* who you are. Then they get excited if you went to the same place. They'll reminisce: ask if you remember the other students. It's pretty disturbing.'

He brushes away another insect and looks beneath the seat. A long line of ants weaves between the legs. ‘Why is that disturbing? I think it’s a useful way to get to know someone.’ He lifts the chair, moving it further from the table.

She lowers her empty mug, letting it fall the last millimetre. ‘No. It’s classist. Redundant.’ She exhales in a rush. ‘Who cares what school you might have gone to? Who you might have been as a teenager? You and me now is what should matter.’

‘Sure.’ He carefully slides his cold tea onto the glass. ‘But knowing who you were – where your parents chose to school you – is also useful.’

She pushes back her hair. ‘Are you serious? Is this why you’re so concerned about where Nimali goes?’

‘No, of course not.’ He crosses his arms. ‘But I do want her to have the best.’

She looks away and focuses on the cat, one leg in the air as it cleans its fur. Avanthi and this man are opposite in almost every way and she wonders how this, their marriage, can possibly work.

‘I’m tired. I think I’ll have a nap.’ She takes a breath and stands. ‘Are you finished?’

He nods, not looking at her.

She reaches across the table to collect his cup and he doesn’t move, eyes fixed on some distant point in the garden. She slides the door open with a foot and lets it close with a bang. The house seems dark and gloomy after the sunny interlude. She dumps the dirty mugs on the counter and shuffles down the corridor to their room, frowning the entire length of the hall.

-- ❧ --

Avanthi hesitates outside. It’ll be time to collect Nimali from school soon and she has to hurry. But it feels wrong: dirty to be visiting an adult shop in the middle of the day. She pushes her bag higher on her shoulder and opens the door. The temperature inside is pleasant and an older woman sitting behind the counter looks up from the magazine she’s reading. Avanthi quickly scans the room for costumes but in her hurry to get inside she didn’t notice that they’re hanging on the wall beside the entrance. As she flicks through them the labels read ‘one size fits all’, and she’s irritated by the implications. What are they trying to say: that every woman should be the same? Can you demand a refund if it doesn’t fit? Claim false advertising? She rubs the fabric on the manikin between her fingers: definitely not natural fibres. Her skin is going to suffocate. She decides on a short nurse outfit. It seems the safest choice, and she slides the packaging onto the counter. It moves awkwardly, sticking to the glass. The shop assistant scans it through while asking her what the weather’s like. She has washing on the line and is worried about the Bureau of Meteorology’s forty per cent rain forecast. Avanthi opens the door for a giggling couple, still shocked by the exorbitant cost of the few skimpy bits of stiff PVC plastic. Hurrying to the car parked across the road, she tries to look inconspicuous with her brown cardboard bag. She carefully stows the package in the back and does a u-turn across the tram tracks, securing her seatbelt. She has all of fifteen minutes to get to school.

She leaves Nimali in the living room with everything she might need: the afternoon cartoons; a small carton of apple juice; a bowl of mixed fruit; and a snack bag of tiny teddys; before locking herself in the bathroom. She undresses and tugs the costume out of the packaging. As she struggles into the plastic she finds it's too tight around her waist and made for a woman with much bigger boobs. It was clearly designed to fit a man's fantasy rather than a real person. The PVC sticks in all the wrong places. She studies the image in the mirror and frowns. If this were any other time she'd toss it into the bin. But she doesn't want to have to go back and find something else, and stuffs the stiff ball under the sink.

She closes the door and throws herself onto the grey bedspread, crossing her feet.

'Call him,' Dayani says the minute she picks up.

She digs at her eyes with a knuckle. 'You know I can't.' Rubbing her head against the pillow.

'Of course you can.'

She inspects her wedding band for scratches: any sign of imperfection. 'I'm *married*. You seem to have forgotten this.'

'Not forgotten. Just ignoring. It's not like you guys love each other or anything.'

'That's a terrible thing to say! How could you?' She twirls the ring around her finger with a thumb.

'It's not. You just think it should be.' She sighs. 'Give the poor bastard another chance. So what if he moved to Queensland.'

She sits up, leaning her head against the wall. 'Why are you so pro-Tony all of the sudden? Is someone paying you?' The headboard is hard behind her shoulders.

Avanthi can hear her drumming against the phone. 'No one's paying us. We just think it's worth considering. And it can't hurt to speak to him ... as friends.'

She begins to press the tip of a finger into the skin around her thumb. 'If I promise to consider it will you leave me alone?'

'So what's it like? This stay at home thingy that you're doing?' she asks quickly.

She laughs. 'Honestly? Dull. I never thought I'd be admitting this, but I would rather be at work.'

'Blasphemy!' she gasps.

'Well, what can I say?' She brings her knees up. 'It's just not for me.'

'What're you going to do? Suggest part-time work?'

'Yeah – I'm thinking about it.' She inspects her toes, tugging at a torn piece of nail. 'But I doubt he'll agree until Nimali has settled in some more.'

'Are you still having trouble getting along?'

‘It’s not that she’s rude, or difficult, or resistant. She’s just ... passive.’ She flicks the bit of nail into her mouth and begins to chew. ‘Like interacting with me isn’t necessary. She does it to Ammi too.’

‘I can’t imagine your mum would like that much.’

‘She *hates* it. Not that she’s said anything but sometimes she looks like she wants to shake her. To be honest, sometimes I want to shake her too. Just for a response.’ She rubs at the rough skin on her little toe.

‘That doesn’t sound good.’

A car stops in the driveway and there’s movement in the living room.

‘It isn’t.’

The front door opens and six-year-old feet thud along the hallway floor.

‘Sorry, Da. Gotta go.’ She spits out the nail. ‘Speak soon?’

‘Think about what I said. Okay?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

She sits in the quiet for a moment, focusing on her breath. But it doesn’t help. She scissored her arms and mutters: ‘take 504’ before standing. Like Hansel and Gretel she follows the path of crumbs, tracking their voices to the living room.

Avanthi waits on the edge of the bed while he changes in the bathroom. Although she had hoped for more, the evening routine unfolds in the usual way with Lalith only saying a few words until Nimali is asleep. She studies her knees: the uneven mounds beneath her jeans; and when he emerges she steps onto the cool tiles, the chill penetrating her socks, and clicks the door closed. She’s quickly learnt that he isn’t comfortable with her nudity. But she doesn’t pull on her pyjamas. Instead she squeezes into the PVC costume and spends a few minutes adjusting her boobs. She inspects the person in the mirror, trying not to let herself feel ridiculous. It shouldn’t matter that the only vaguely nurse-like part of the uniform is the red cross on her chest. She pinches her cheeks and steps into the bedroom. But Lalith doesn’t even look up. Like most nights, he’s reading, utterly engrossed. She slowly walks the few steps across the carpet: sucking in her stomach and thrusting out her tits, while also trying to coordinate a seductive smile. However it’s not until she’s reached the edge of the bed that he notices her. He stares confused, and drops the book into his lap. But his expression quickly changes when she leans down to touch his leg, one breast falling free from the too loose halter-top.

‘What are you doing?’ He pulls his foot out of her grasp.

‘What does it look like?’ Ignoring the fluttering in her chest.

‘Stop it.’ He straightens his spine. ‘Stop it *now*.’

She recoils and moves away to sit in the armchair by the door.

She crosses her arms. ‘You don’t like it.’ It isn’t a question.

He stares at her before spitting: 'You look like a whore.'

'I thought it might help.' Trying not to let the shock show.

'It doesn't.' Straightening the slightly bent book cover. 'Take it off.'

She stands with a small smile, thinking there's still a chance to make this work.

'In the bathroom,' he adds, reading her expression.

Her pulse races, slamming against her ribs as it navigates the corners. She tells herself not to cry: a mantra on an audio loop. 'We never have sex,' she says quietly, breathlessly: suddenly desperate for air.

'Get out.'

'But -'

'Get. Out.'

She grabs her mobile and the dressing gown from over the back of the chair and slams the door. In the hallway she leans against the wall and listens to her heart. When only a dull ache remains, she undresses in the spare room and curls up under the blanket. In the dark, the blue fish statue watches her, bubbles in its mouth like the ones in her veins.

She will not cry.

She reaches for the phone and types the words she's been wanting to say since his message the day she collected Lalith and Nimali from the airport.

I miss you too

-- ♪ --

Avanthi turns off the T.V. She sits and stares at the blank screen before uncurling her legs. It's late and Lalith will be asleep. But she considers spending the night in the spare room anyway. Several minutes pass as she listens to the silence. Her muscles are unwilling as she struggles from the couch and her pyjama pants are twisted. She stops to straighten them, finishes her cup of water, and carefully slides the glass onto the kitchen counter. Then there's nothing left to do but go to bed. Her feet make no noise on the hallway floor and it's almost like she's not there at all. She quietly opens the door and blinks. Lalith's light is still on. He looks up from a photograph and they stare for a moment. She's confused by the tears in his eyes.

He opens the bedside drawer and the picture disappears. 'I thought you were in the other room tonight.'

'I thought you were already asleep.' She's instantly irritated.

He turns off the lamp and leaves her in darkness. 'I will be in a moment.'

She flicks on the overhead switch. 'You could at least wait until I've gotten into bed.'

He doesn't look at her, his face hidden by a wall of blanket, and reaches up, lighting the room. She plunges them into darkness again and reluctantly shuffles towards the

bed. But she hesitates at the end and instead of lying down, feels her way around to his side, her fingers brushing against his legs and chest.

‘What are you doing?’

She opens his bedside drawer.

‘That’s *mine*.’ His fingers latch onto her wrist.

But she’s already slammed on the lamp, the photo in her other hand. It’s a picture of a woman holding a baby. The very same image Nimali keeps beneath her pillow and kisses every night before she goes to sleep.

‘You still love her, don’t you?’

His fingers tighten. ‘I’ll always love her.’

She looks at him, his eyes red from crying. ‘Did you love her when you married?’

His grip loosens and his hand retreats beneath the covers. He turns away. She starts to feel funny, disjointed. Split: like two images that don’t quite line up, one out of sync with the other. She feels a sudden rush of vertigo and looks at the red marks on her wrist. How did she get to this point? To a place where nothing quite matches? She strips off her pyjamas not caring what he thinks and opens the wardrobe. She re-dresses in a pair of jeans, a long-sleeved top, socks, shoes, and a scarf. When she turns around he hasn’t moved and she stares at his undefined form before taking a breath and closing the door. But she stops mid-swing and slips an arm through the gap to flick on the overhead light. It illuminates the room with her absence and the momentary satisfaction on her face. Outside she doesn’t pause. Not on the steps and not at the gate. Her stride is smooth, hands jammed deep in her pockets, handbag tight against her side. When she reaches the pub, two blocks down, the warm light invites her in: the smell, the bartender, and his cheerful smile. Tonight she’s not a wife or a mother; unemployed or bored; Sri Lankan or Australian; in love or heart-broken. Tonight, she’s just a woman in a bar.

The. End.

-- ❧ --

Avanthi’s eyes glance over them and away, her elbow resting on the windowsill. The tram rattles along the tracks and it lurches with speed. She watches the back end sway like a slinky toy. It’s getting late and it feels like the driver is dangerously eager to reach the depot. Not that she minds. A hazard would not be unwelcome: a dramatic event to punctuate the day, her week, the month, her life since Tony left her. She starts to fantasise a derailment and the immediate scene afterwards: a dislocated shoulder, a woman who has fallen backwards. But an excited voice interrupts. Two people sit on the seat facing hers: a brown-skinned girl on her father’s lap. His hands stroke the back of her neck, fingers tangling in her hair. He jiggles his legs, making her giggle.

‘Appachi, can I stand on your knees?’ She touches her nose to his chin.

He pokes her under the arm. ‘Aren’t you a bit big for that now?’

‘Is six too big?’ She sounds surprised.

He brushes her cheek with a thumb. ‘I think it might be.’

She shifts in his lap, grinding her bony arse onto his legs. ‘Can we play another game?’

‘What about the new one: Ammi’s favourite? Eye spy with my little eye, something beginning with...’ He tries to catch Avanthi’s attention as he begins the game but she turns back to the window, staring into the dwindling light.

She lets her vision lose focus and cars, buildings, and trees pass in a blur of muted colour. People move with purpose and ease beyond the confines of the jolting tram. A cluster of joggers, women in suits with white runners peeking from beneath their pant hems or skirts, men and women with bags of groceries, a woman pushing a pram. Their lives march on as the tram zips past, and the driver only stops when someone pushes the bell and insists. She closes her eyes and lets her shoulders relax into the swaying jolt. When she next looks outside the scene has changed, replaced by a slightly darker one. She explores her teeth with her tongue and studies the other people nearby, ignoring the two on the seat opposite. Beneath the florescent light, a teenager in shorts and a singlet, gym bag on the seat beside her, stares back. She jerks her head and turns her attention to a woman a few seats further down. She inspects the way the grey suit pants hug her hips, trying to decide if it’s a flattering cut for her shape. But before long, a noise draws her gaze to a young couple touching, kissing, uncaring and oblivious. Their intimacy is too intense, like looking into the flare of an arc welder, and it pushes her back to the moving shapes beyond the window. The man and girl begin to sing a song and his foot deliberately nudges Avanthi’s. Irritation flashes before she shoves it away, trying to keep her expression neutral. She wonders what the lives of the other women on this tram are like and if they feel in control. She pinches the coarse blue material of her pants between two fingers and imagines replacing them with suit pants. In her memory the material is softer, finer, suffocating in a way that’s comfortingly familiar. A high-pitched voice pulls at her. It yanks her eyes away from the world beyond the window.

‘Appachi, why does my tummy look like this –’ She lifts the bottom of her shirt to reveal her rounded stomach, ‘– when I’m sitting, but is flat when I lie on the ground?’

He frowns and tugs it down. ‘You mustn’t lift your top in public.’

She tilts her head. ‘But why’s it flat when I’m on the ground?’

He looks across at Avanthi. ‘Gravity.’

‘What’s that?’ She plays with the collar of his grey shirt.

He shifts his legs. ‘The stuff that keeps you from floating away.’

‘I could do that?’ She places her hands on either side of his face.

He smiles. ‘Only if there wasn’t gravity.’

‘How do we make it go away?’ she demands.

He gently removes her fingers from his cheeks. ‘You can’t.’

‘Oh.’ She settles back into his lap and watches Avanthi on the other seat as she stares outside.

For a few minutes no one talks. Not a single person. All of the passengers are lost in thought... or in a book or phone, as the tram rattles, groans and squeaks down the road.

In this silence her voice is loud and abrupt. ‘When’s Ammi coming back?’ She leans forward trying to catch Avanthi’s eye.

The man hesitates. ‘When she’s ready.’

She grips his hand. ‘When will that be?’

A black plastic knife shines silver in the fading sunlight.

‘At our stop.’

The girl nods.

Avanthi’s tongue does another inventory of her back teeth as they pass a Vietnamese restaurant. The owners have stuck synthetic fluoro-coloured flowers into the gaps where the hedge has died. It reminds her of a time when Liz once did a similar thing before a party. Embarrassed that almost everything in her garden had shrivelled and turned brown, she went and bought pots of bright orange and purple flowers. They only had to last the weekend. But they outdid her expectations and lived a whole week. The tram turns onto High Street and she realises she’s almost home. Whatever that means. She thinks about all the things that need to be done before she can go to bed and spend eight hours asleep, away from her life. She tacks a neutral expression onto her face, her posture, her skin, and studies the ring on her finger: the piece of jewellery that staples them together. The joins are lumpy. It is clumsy workmanship. She often thinks the matchmaker should never have been paid. Is it too late to demand recompense?

They’re close; it’s almost time. Her mobile vibrates in her pocket and she ignores it. She looks up expectantly, her tongue behind her teeth. She doesn’t have to pull the signal cord. It’s already been done. The ringing stops and curiosity finally overcomes detachment. A text message flashes on the screen as she reaches for it.

I can’t stop thinking about you –

Her throat tightens.

– *I hear you got married...*

The tram has come to a complete stop and she thrusts the phone away.

The man and girl are already standing when Nimali looks up at Lalith. ‘Will Ammi hold my hand?’

He looks across at Avanthi and allows a short moment to pass before he answers.

‘Of course.’

A small hand worms its way into hers, forcing it open. Avanthi looks down at the skinny little fingers wedged between her own. But only seconds pass before that small

hand grips her tight and drags her down the steps. Lalith follows more slowly, allowing Nimali to take the lead. But when the tram doors prematurely start to close, he finds himself wedged in the gap.

Research Statement

Research Background

While the debate surrounding the ethics of storytelling exists, authors rarely discuss their basis for making decisions about the ethics of a narrative voice and focalization; and few analysts explore the topic in concrete terms. However, the ethics of identity, naming and appropriation apply to both everyday life and creative practice, and this research recognizes the importance of continued dialogue on the topic amongst creative writing practitioners. My research builds on earlier work on the ethics of practice by theorists including Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau and Carl Tighe, and by contemporary novelists who explore the boundaries of ethical narration.

Research Contribution

The short story *Staple us Together* by Jessica Halligan-Rose, an extract from the novel manuscript, is about a Sri Lankan Australian family who have been stapled together by influences other than romantic love. It addresses the questions surrounding the ethics of telling a story in voices that are categorically different from the author's. In doing so, it furthers the debate around identity, ethics and ownership: whose story it is, who can tell it, and who is silenced in the telling.

Research Significance

The significance of this research is that it addresses a currently under-explored issue that is nonetheless central to creative practice. Its value is indicated by the following achievements: Jessica's award of the CAL Fellowship for Redrafting Residency with Charlotte Wood at Varuna The Writer's House for the novel *Staple Us Together*; its being shortlisted for the Penguin Varuna Development Scholarship; its commendation for the Ray Koppe Young Writer's Residency; and the nine well-renowned authors who have been interviewed as part of this project.