

“24 November 2014: Springvale Woman Descends To Underground”

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Christina is pegging Mary’s wet blue towel to the taut wire of the Hills Hoist when the lawn below her gives way. The cylinder of her body fixes enough weight within a small enough circumference on a thin enough surface to punch out a hole and p

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she’s travelling well in life—it’s an ordinary life, but a good one: six kids, a house with a backyard in a modest suburb, the routines of domesticity lending rhythm to her days—when into one of those routines comes crashing the world or, rather, she goes crashing through it.

She plunges into water and surfaces, spluttering, spits out mud. Rainy light, dank air, way up there a circle of sky and no floor to balance her weight on. She moves her feet as little as possible, just enough to stay afloat, and stretches out her arms. She can’t touch the walls. Clumps of earth at the opening crumble and spin down, plopping and plinking around her.

Christina is in Springvale, Melbourne, but not really; down here is not Springvale. Springvale is a Feng Shui–designed Buddhist cemetery on a westward-facing slope, V8 Supercars buzzing around the Sandown circuit, greyhounds loping, slack jawed, after a mechanical white rabbit (she followed no white rabbit, and yet here she is). It’s home of rising NRL star Mahe Fonua, who set a Storm club record when he ordered fifty tickets for family and friends to attend his debut match. In Springvale, shoppers slurp tapioca pearls through straws and buy stacks of golden joss paper to burn for their beloved deceased; in Springvale, thanks to a recent upgrade, Christina no longer waits forty minutes behind the candy cane of the boom gate once it has made its dinging descent.

She’s underground, now, not in Springvale. For Dostoyevsky, the underground is a sickness, a prison of our own making that recalls the Ancient Greeks’ Tartarus, dungeon of torment. To inhabit the underground means drawing inward, lacking the gumption to grasp life with both hands, severing ties with the stuff of existence—with family, friends, with other markers of identity and belonging (with Springvale, in other words). All heroes perform actions that matter in the world, that instigate some effect; heroes have this in common. Dostoyevsky’s undergroundling does not. Underground, actions don’t matter. The undergroundling narrates the following: “‘*Now’s the time to up and hurl a bottle at them all,*’ I thought, took the bottle, and poured myself a full glass.” Rising resolve, yes!, and then—aborted.

Christina thinks of her children. She can’t accept this severance from them; no undergroundling ways for her. She needs to act. Not to move too much—that might cause her to be buried alive—but to call out.

“Help,” she croaks. “Help, Mary,”—louder, now—“help me!”

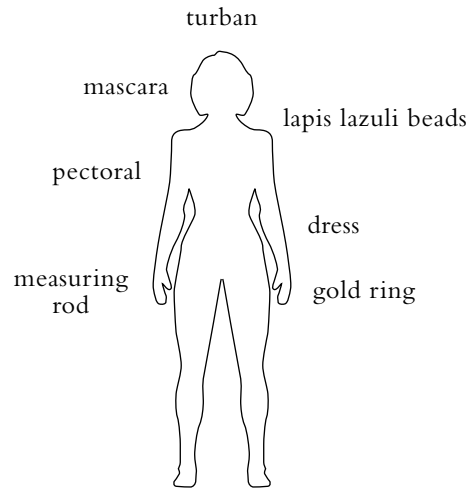
There is, she knows, a problem. The reason she is here is because she is helping Mary,

who is elderly, who can no longer do her housework, who isn't all that mobile, who, in fact, can't hear too well. Spiders and insects alight on her neck, drop into her hair.

"I'm down here. Help!"

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An antecedent: Sumerian goddess Inanna, thirsting for adventure, decided to embark on a dangerous descent to the underworld. She did so clothed with seven markers of civilisation.



But all were stripped from her, one at each of the seven gates, until she was naked and powerless.

Christina's clothing has likewise lost all upthere meaning, its cut and colours obscured, its cleanliness obliterated: gone all that she expressed, consciously or not, in presenting herself like so. It is hers no longer; it has been claimed—sealed in oozing mud—by downhere. Any protection it afforded is ineffective in the underground. The cold is pressing the air from her, setting her teeth to chattering.

Inanna's corpse was hung from a hook, but Inanna was smart: she had a contingency plan. After three days of absence, her servant knew to go to the gods and demand that they save her. The first two gods spoke the divine equivalent of, Serves her right. She had, after all, got it in her impetuous head to go where no one else had ever escaped. But the third god took pity. He dug the dirt from beneath his fingernails and from it fashioned two androgynous beings. These he directed to slip through the underworld door pivots in order to sprinkle her corpse with plants and water. The sprinklings would revive Inanna; after this, she could arise.

Christina never had the chance to tell anyone about her descent. There is a possibility that Mary might notice and wonder at her absence, but it is just as likely that her head will stoop and she will doze in her armchair and, on waking, think Christina has crept out so as not to disturb her. How much longer can Christina withstand this cold?

One more antecedent: Chinese princess Miaoshan's father ordered her put to death for

choosing to become a nun rather than marry the wealthy man he had picked for her. Out of mercy for her reluctant executioner, Miaoshan took on the bad karma he attracted for ending her life, which caused her to descend to Naraka, underworld of torment.

A daughter struggling to overcome her father's will and be mistress of her own person must be the fundamental horror story of the patriarchal family, and of the wider society for which it is a microcosm. It pains Christina to remember why she fell down here, how it would never have happened had she not been carrying out that most gendered of tasks, the prickling skin across her forearms recalling the cool damp of the flapping towel.

Down in Naraka, Miaoshan passed the knife mountain, sword tree and body saws. She was filled with compassion for the suffering, a feeling that released her good karma, turning the instruments of torture into lotus flowers and causing Naraka to resound with golden bells and jade chimes. But after a time Naraka's ruler grew concerned that this underworld-turned-paradise wouldn't encourage the living to practise goodness. He decided to make an exception of Miaoshan by getting her the hell out of there: he sent her back up to life.

So Miaoshan, good Miaoshan, escaped the underworld, too. The good don't stay underground long. The irony of a good deed having brought Christina here! But that irony, surely, will be what saves her. From what she knows of karma, she figures that being in danger for helping Mary is, right now, her cosmic talisman, her spiritual leverage for having someone hear her cries soon.

"HEEEELP!" Yesterday, she thinks, yesterday was my youngest's eleventh birthday.

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There is another irony: Christina lives in a postmodern era, and postmodern thought makes no room for the underground. Its theorists view the world as composed of multiple, interacting surfaces. Surface is what counts; there is no hierarchy of meaning. If only those theorists could see her now. It's almost as if the fact of her fall has defied them and tumbled her, theory-wise, back in time.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Carl Jung was interested not in surface but in what lay under it: he conceived the unconscious as residing below the conscious mind. The unconscious, he wrote, speaks to our conscious mind from its position of beneath; down there, way down there, it is a kind of primordial swamp of symbols, mythic images and metaphors that it might throw up in moments of stress, or to which the self might descend in order to retrieve these riches.

The branch of psychology that takes the unconscious into account is called depth psychology: again, the suggestion is of a kind of topography of the mind that locates the unconscious as dwelling somewhere below, in the deep. This is what Jung writes in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: "In order to grasp the fantasies which were stirring in me "underground", I knew that I had to let myself plummet down into them." The underground exists and it is located, for Jung, within.

Jung thought that a journey to and, crucially, a return from this lower world—mentally

a night sea journey, perhaps, or a descent into the belly of the monster—served to restore the whole person. We fear the unconscious, fear that latent psychosis might lurk there, but if we are brave enough to let go and descend into it, each of us might come back a fuller, more integrated “I”. It is where there lies abundant creativity, but also potential ruin. If the striking out and the return are to be meaningful, danger is key.

What happens when we observe the world from this position of below? We might ask Christina what Springvale looks like from not a southerly or a northerly but an underground aspect. Distant, I would think; frustratingly, fearfully so. Spatially, not so far away, but conceptually as remote as a star. Maybe this is why hermits seek out caves, and teenagers, tunnels (those in Melbourne are lucky: Melbourne’s is the most elaborate storm-water drain system in the world). The perspective on surface life that the underground offers is one of remove; this occupying a threshold blurs certainties, infects the mundane. It’s not about where you are, but about the view it offers on the place you’re from. Springvale. Through that ceiling porthole, the only view of it, and the view of it, evasive: some light, some sky, a creeping bleach of cloud. Imagine, then, when a voice ricochets down.

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“Christina,” it says, and by this time her teeth are rattling so violently that she thinks, for a moment, that her thoughts conjured it.

“Christina,” and then, slithering through that overhead aperture, a rope, and being told to grasp it, to pull its loop over her and tuck it beneath her arms, to hold tight and lean back. And the being suspended, the slow rock upwards, rope biting a divide across her spine, depth growing below her but she hardly knows it because all she is looking at is that circle of bright and in her squinting view it is growing larger.

Through the opening. The shock, this emergence onto the balding, browning lawn, in front the ruddy bricks and sallow window frames, if she cocks her head, the nest-sized wicker basket of pegs hanging from the hoist handle and the fire fighters in a far-side cluster, one of them edging closer and outstretching a hand and, when she places her own into it, his grasping her and pulling her out, away, towards the lot of them.

In the end, Springvale itself has proved her saviour, her means of finding her way back to it. A neighbour, pottering in his backyard, heard her cries and, like all aboveground heroes, acted. Now the paramedic checks her over and, with a pat, says, All good. In Springvale, you shouldn’t dwell, especially not in depth. But the underground has a message about miscalculating its potency. Later, her daughter rushes Christina to hospital, where doctors discover that she has a hypothermia-induced blockage to her heart. She is admitted overnight. She’ll be right, the laconic paramedic had said before sending her home, but that wasn’t really the case.

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If this were somewhere in the US, Christina would sign a book deal and tour the country as a motivational speaker. This being Springvale, she is quietly getting on with it. But she knows something: How easy it is to fall into adventure! Some nights, she is back there, enclosed by the

earth; her sleeping mind skips the being swallowed to arrive at the lying curled in the womb. People look to Christina now as someone who has contemplated the deep. In discussions, her opinion holds extra weight. She can leave social engagements early without risking offence. Neighbours seek her counsel.

Of an evening, Springvaleans have taken to recounting to their children the tale of Christina the Brave, especially when the weather is balmy enough that sleep doesn't come easily. The children's tossing and sighing grow still while they listen to the details of Christina's descent. Down there, some know, she encountered a bunyip. Down there, she had to brace against the walls lest they cave in. Down there, she looked inside herself.

In private, Christina finds herself irritable, especially with her children. She leaves the dishes in the sink so that she might dig up and replant the garden. All the while there persists the disquieting sense that the underground slipped a message into a pocket of her mind and she hasn't quite deciphered its meaning. In her dreams, the muddy water has become amniotic fluid and the cavern, a caul. When visitors gasp, place a hand on her arm, cover their mouths or widen their eyes, she shakes her head. It wasn't like that. At least, that's not how she remembers it.

One Monday when she is still on stress leave, she drives to the corner of the racecourse where Mile Creek wrestles to the surface. She parks the car, thinking she will get out a moment to take a look, but after gazing on the lacklustre eddy of water in the concreted bed she finds herself following it downstream.

She picks her way along a chain-link fence, placing a hand on its rail when a rock unsteadies her footing. On the far side of the creek there are puffs of balloon writing along palings that segregate the bank from backyards. The grass here is a technicolour fantasy flecked with cup-lid discs, the metallic bright of drink cans, a burnt tennis flag.

Before she knows it, Christina is picking them out from the tangles. Next she is hunting for them, scanning the ground for a glint and heeding that glint's beckon. The concreted bed is bothering her. Concrete even in a creek bed, she thinks, and in her mind's eye broadens her perspective to the sprawl of this city. How, she wonders, when so smothered, does the earth breathe? This thought isn't readily shaken. It trips over its feet after her when she returns to her car and drives home.

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These days, if you are observant, walking Springvale's footpaths you might see something by a front gate, which you might squat to inspect: a small basket, woven from banana leaves, and within it, a bluster of sky, flamingo and sun in the forms of agapanthus, Singapore orchid and frangipani. Perhaps a smile of watermelon, too. You might speculate that the popularity of Bali as a holiday destination among Springvaleans has made these decorations the new Tibetan prayer flags.

Let's say you do notice that first basket. Further on, there is one more. It has a stick of incense still smoking, and tucked inside it, a photo. Only its corner is visible, the rest of it covered by flowers. You can't bring yourself to touch what looks so modestly sacred. Unlike the

prayer flags, somehow these baskets don't seem emptied of meaning.

Dusk is staining the air by the time you find another. This one's photo isn't obscured. You squint at it, trying to make it out in the tannin light. The dark is deepening, but you would almost swear that you recognise the face in the picture as Christina's.

As you crouch, a dog's barks dart at something and then the ground awakes beneath your feet, a shiver travelling up a spine as broad as the neighbourhood. It is just a tremble, but it takes you a moment to understand what is happening. Soon the evening is bright-eyed with neighbours on porches, front doors clapping behind their hurried exits. The shudders go on.

You think you hear something below, so you crouch closer to the footpath. Again, the sound, a kind of rushing, barely formed words, warps and tumults or perhaps just a feeling. You can't be sure, so you lay down and press your ear to the cement.

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Notes:

The Dostoyevsky *Notes from Underground* quotations is Richard Pevear and Larissa Volkhonsky's 1993 translation.

The Jung *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* quotations (recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffé) is Richard and Clara Winston's 1961 translation.