

Without Looking Back

Elaine Bougie Gilligan

My colleague told me, her eyes a little saddened, that there was something about me—the way I held my body—just something, that reminded her of her sister. Her sister, who died not so long ago, accidentally. I told her I knew what she meant, as somebody recently reminded me of my sister, and no one ever had before. And in my case, my sister died 36 years ago.

I realized afterwards, that wasn't strictly true. There were just a few times, before I met my cousin's young daughter last year, that I had an uncanny sort of reminder of Adele. It seems to me now, what brought this about, each time, was a situation that

seemed to symbolize what it was like to lose Adele—to lose her so unexpectedly, without a chance to say goodbye.

The first instance took place years ago, on a city bus in the 1980s. I was lining up to leave by the back door, behind a young woman who stood unmoving in the doorway ahead of me. As I waited, inches behind her, for the bus to stop, I noticed her long hair had the same unusual shades and streaks of colour as my sister's. Both my sister and I were blonde as young children, and our hair darkened in our teen years. In the last year of her life, she had light brown hair with red and blonde highlights scattered



Adele Bougie, 1970

throughout. I had never seen hair quite like Adele's—that slightly wavy mane of different colours—not till that day on the bus.

The more I looked at the strange girl's hair, the more uneasy I became, beginning to imagine I was standing behind a ghost or reincarnation of my sister. This



Still from: Picnic at Hanging Rock

strange passing fixation was boosted by the fact the strawberry blonde girl never once turned towards me as the bus came to a stop, as the door opened and she stepped down and walked off. About the same height as Adele, with the same long legs, the ghostly girl strode away from me down the city sidewalk. I was unnerved by this re-enactment, as it seemed, of the way my sister left. She was suddenly gone with her thoughts and feelings not

known—her life taken by an apparently random act of violence perpetrated by a stranger. She left life with her face unseen, turned towards a future we, her family and friends, had never imagined for her. She left without looking back.

I shook off those odd thoughts about the girl on the bus, but I didn't forget them. The 1975 Peter Weir film, *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, which I viewed years

after its release, struck the same haunting note, but brought some better understanding. This film depicts the true story of the mysterious disappearance of several young teenage girls in Victorian Australia, during a school outing to the landmark, Hanging Rock.

In the film, when the girls walked through a cleft in Hanging Rock without looking back, their long wavy hair blowing slightly behind them in the breeze, I was physically shocked by the reminder of my sister's death. They were so young and lovely, and they strode off in that purposeful fashion, bent on where they were going, leaving no clues and no explanations.

Perhaps that picture of the vanishing girls is the perfect symbol of bereavement. We can never know

exactly where they go-- those who die and leave us--no matter what faith or lack of it we enjoy. The dead always go on ahead of us, away from our world, with their faces turned. We cannot see what they see—not until we go where they have gone.

That is a little sad and frightening, at times, but on a good day, there's some comfort in it. Tom Waits sings, "*Don't say goodbye—he's just leaving early.*" So, our dead have just left a little earlier than ourselves. We watch wistfully behind and wait our turn, wait to see what lies there in that mystery. 🍷