This is the published version (version of record) of:
Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria 2008, After midnight, a morning, Hecate: an interdisciplinary journal of women's liberation, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 52-54.

Available from Deakin Research Online:
http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30017538

Reproduced with kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2008, Hecate
After Midnight, a Morning

For Jacqui Zephyr Cussen, whose idea it was to explore women’s ‘after midnight morns’

After midnight, a morning begins.

It’s there in the sepia light of my study lamp, carving a soft warm space out of the darkness, the cold prowling on the edges. It’s there in the moonglow from my computer screen, and in the strobe street-lighting cutting through tree branches on a windy night outside my window. I’m cocooned in an airbath of light and warmth, while just behind me, inside the house, and just outside my window, shrouds the dark within which others sleep, or toss, or shiver.

I tap away, constructing lives and stories. My daytime spirit drifts somewhere in the darkness of the house, settling in the kitchen or the lounge, my daytime domains, while my nocturnal life takes up residence here in the after midnight morning of my study. Eventually I will succumb to the embrace of seductive sleep whispering to me from the bedroom.

I tap away, sounding life into the stillness of others’ sleep, my partner and daughter in rooms on either side of my after midnight morning room. Sometimes they’ll wake and come to me, faces fuzzy with sleep, eyes vacantly scanning the words on the computer screen. My daughter climbs onto my lap and nuzzles her warm sleepy hair into my neck, her hot sleepy breath dampening my cheek. My partner massages my shoulders and asks if I want a drink or something to eat, as if this self of mine has just arrived from somewhere else. But soon they’ll slide away back to their beds, for they are creatures of the day.

Now and again I pad my way from the study, past the bedrooms to the kitchen, fingers feeling the way along invisible walls, lured by desire for chocolate, or a hot drink, or a stretching walk. I may gaze at my daughter, her blanketed body basking in the gazes of the latest bare-chested ‘hotties’ on her walls, daytime figures provocatively barely visible in the moon-dark of her room. What world does she minx through behind those closed eyes? I may gaze at my partner, his body my beloved territory of strong muscle, soft belly and sensitive body hair, traversed and marked with my desire earlier in the evening. His breathing is now slow and steady, and I look forward to moulding my body around his, my hand on his heart to feel the tender pounding of life and love.

But, for now, a steaming herbal tea, my feet in socks tap-dancing on the heater under my desk, my hair tied away, my face stripped of make-up, my body wrapped in something formless and free, I shape/become my other, the after midnight morning else, travelling into other worlds and other people’s lives. For they will not come out during the day no matter how much I entice and plead. The day is
already too crowded with lives and stories and noise, and I wouldn’t see them, or hear them, or understand them.

So why have I become like this, a vampire rising again after midnight to feed from a computer’s screen as it forms toothmark letters?

I remember those times I awoke after midnight as a child. Through the darkness I’d see a dim light tunnelling toward me from the kitchen. I’d hear the flicker of light switches, the echoing trickles of water from the bathroom, the swishes of clothing as my mother removed her night clothes and got dressed to go to work in a bakery that looked like a factory. Her shoes would then tap their way to my bedroom: her toothpaste breath, her floral cheap perfume, stingy smelly hairspray, warm lips leaving a lipstick kiss on my face that I’d discover and relish in the morning mirror. These things would disorient me with their morning smells and sounds after midnight, while reassuring and cosying me that there was love and life in the scary dark of night. If I kept my eyes closed I could imagine it was sunny outside my window. I would feel her fingers adjust my blanket or stroke hair strands away from my face, and then I’d hear her taps to my brother’s room and the same sounds of blankets and love.

Then she’d be in the kitchen, and I’d hear cups tinkling, the fridge door sighing awake, and soon I’d smell the strong Italian coffee as the espresso coffee-maker spluttered and spat angrily, indignant at being hauled out again at this hour.

If I got up and wandered fuzzily into the kitchen, I’d see her, although at first I’d squint and try to cover my eyes against this dazzling morning sunshine in the middle of the night: the sunflower yellow kitchen under the single strong light bulb, the sky blue uniform, the gleaming white shoes, and the bright red lipstick parting to a good morning smile.

Sometimes my father would be standing with her at the sink, teddy bear huggy in his pyjamas, his unruly hair devoid of the taming hair oil, his face ticklishly prickly with beard growth. They’d be talking quietly, taking this slice of private time. But most of the time he slept on, needing every minute to soothe the body aches from his daytime factory work.

I might take a slice of panettone or taralle and watch my mother dunk hers in her coffee as she stood near the sink, looking out into the darkness cut away by the streetlight, sipping her scalding coffee, preparing a lunch of prosciutto and provolone between hunks of bread to be eaten in the lunchtime break at about eight in the morning. What was she thinking as she sipped and chewed in her life lived after midnight? The red eye light of her bike would soon slice the dark cold as she cycled to the bakery so that others could get up in the morning and have their lamingtons and donuts for breakfast, have their pies and pasties for lunch. But by then she’d be on her way home again to sleep for a few hours before beginning her day just
before we came home from school. Was she thinking about how much money this 3 am to 11 am shift would bring — gradually enough for a car, for carpet, for a phone, for a better lounge suite, to put some away ‘just in case’: my father’s stroke had been an after midnight morning we would never forget. And perhaps that little extra for a pair of shoes for her daughter, or new shorts for her son, or a nice frock she’d seen at K-mart that would look so lovely at the next wedding.

Coffee finished, the taralle tin back in the cupboard, the panettone re-wrapped, she’d tie a scarf around her hair, smiling brightly at me while even then I wondered how she could look so alert while I stood there mussed and muddled. If it was an icy night, she’d put on a bright morning blue and sunrise pink coat. If it was raining she’d put on a plastic hair bonnet, sunflowers cascading all over it, and a bright yellow raincoat. She’d tell me to lock the kitchen door behind her and I’d stand on tiptoe to watch through the glass of the door as she got onto the bicycle, making sure the lights worked before she cycled away.

Only then would I go back to sleep as the night returned and settled around me. And I’d miss her, still smelling her in the coffee, cheap perfume and hairspray.

We’d be at school when she came home, dad having done the morning shift with us: getting us up, bathed, dressed, breakfasted and off to school before putting on his overalls and riding his bike to a factory to make metal parts that made cars, a car he would earn enough to buy one day.

By the time we’d come hurtling noisily back from school with neighbourhood kids in tow, Mum would be up getting tea ready, smiling and moving fast if she’d slept enough, or tired and yet smiling through it if she’d taken some of the daylight hours to do daylight things like catch up on housework or pay bills.

Dad would come home on his bike, covered in grease and smelling of petrol. He’d rush to the bathroom and then emerge smelling like flowers to have some precious hours together. There’d be animated conversation over dinner, then after-dinner playfights on the lino, not really missing the TV we never had. But they’d soon go to bed, Dad with aching muscles, Mum aware that in four hours she’d be getting up again. We’d see her eyes getting misty as she sat in her armchair tenderly watching us scampering all over Dad.

So both my mother and I have travelled to different worlds and lived different lives in the after midnight morning. She on her bike to a bakery to make that extra money that guaranteed me an education so I wouldn’t have to work hard, or do without sleep. So I could sit in a comfy cushy university office during the day and comfy cosy study at night, with ‘do not delete’ memories of what real hard work means, to write about the lives some women lead in after midnight mornings.

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli