

## 2

### Circus Scene

**M**y mother's stories of her childhood, and in particular stories about her father, were absorbed by me and slotted into scenes from my childhood to fill the gaps left where love should have been. My grandfather, who died long before I was born, was a devoted father and husband and, above all else, a lover of Scottish poetry and songs. Mother recalled her father's childhood dream of joining Hingler's Circus.

My grandfather and a boyhood friend had saved up for their train fare and ticket to see the circus which would provide fuel for their dreams and a temporary escape from their life of drudgery in a Glasgow bakery in the mid-1880s. On purchasing his ticket, my grandfather had pushed his way up to the very front row of the audience so that he could get an unobstructed view of the clowns, lion tamer, and exotic animals promised in the program. The long train ride in the cold and sleet had been well worth it, he thought, as he sat with eyes dazzled by the bright lights above the flimsy barrier between him and the next act, the performing lions.

As the lights dimmed and the curtain slowly parted, the highly spangled lion-tamer with a black handle-bar moustache entered the centre stage with the inevitable whip and chair, the universal symbols of mastery over the wild beast. With a quiver and a billowing of the black curtain the mighty beasts entered snarling,

and the whip cracked and the lions jumped through hoops ablaze with tongues of gold and blue flames. They danced on red cubes and rolled under brightly coloured bridges. The audience cheered and laughed at the antics of the proud and infuriated creatures whose hatred of men shone in their eyes brighter than the flames of the hoops. As a lover of all animals my grandfather's young heart ached at their plight. At last, the final trick. The lion tamer went behind the scenes and emerged with a red bucket filled with little, white papier-mâché mice which when caught in mid-air by the lions would burst and flood the air with minute specks of silver paper. At least, that is what was supposed to have happened. Instead, the lion-tamer tripped on the leg of his protective chair, spilt the bucket of papier-mâché mice, and was instantly set upon by the starving and infuriated lions.

The effect of a feeding frenzy on starving animals can prompt all sorts of results, and this occasion was no exception. Immediately upon witnessing the savage attack the audience arose in one body and ran shrieking from the circus tent. My grandfather sat tight, riveted to his seat at the scene of revenge by the king of the beasts on the hapless lion-tamer whose screams were punctuated by the popping of papier-mâché mice. The resulting avalanche of glittering paper formed a surreal background to the gruesome entertainment before him. Within seconds of the attack, the largest lion pointed his rear end towards my grandfather and let forth a very large, very smelly, very fluid diarrhoea which was stopped in mid-stream by my grandfather's face. Now, anyone who has had dealings with a full kitty-litter tray will have to agree that a nervous kitty can leave behind a repellent that could clear out Africa. When an excited lion makes a kitty-litter tray of your face there is no tragedy on Earth that could command a respectful two minute silence for the dead. My grandfather leaped up and groped his way to the exit blinded by poo and smelling like a burst sewer. He became

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the next victim of the evening as people punched and kicked him away from them to escape his stench.

What had begun as an exhilarating adventure for a couple of young lads from smoggy, sooty Glasgow travelling to the bright lights of a circus had ended in a cold, long walk home alone accompanied only by a smell which remained in my grandfather's memory as the price paid for a glimpse into his unattainable dream of joining the circus.

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### Grandfather's Tune

**M**other filled my mind with scenes of warm hearths and musical evenings spent around the piano, and Sunday afternoons singing Moody and Sankey hymns while her father sang in his rich tenor voice. He composed songs to his wife and sang these with great gusto complete with tears and theatrical semaphore. I loved the stories about Grandfather and felt happy when Mother would say to me after I had played the piano or violin, "Well, your grandfather must surely be looking down from Heaven and smiling on you with great pride today."

Mother often recalled how her father had a special tune which he had composed for his wife, Nellie. Every day of his married life he whistled that tune as he walked up the alley beside their house called "Ellen's Lea" in Giffnock, outside Glasgow. As I also composed music, I had asked Mother and my aunts and uncles if they could recall the tune which their father had composed for their mother on her wedding day, but only the memory of their father whistling and the excitement it aroused at the sound of his return home each evening was recalled. The tune itself was lost from their memory.

As I grew up and entered the University of Melbourne Conservatorium, I still entertained mental conversations with my grandfather as I sat on the long train journey from Watsonia to Flinders

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Street Station in Melbourne. I had a fear about oversleeping the alarm clock so my mother used to set her electric alarm clock to my rising time just in case my clock failed to go off.

On the day of an end-of-year exam in music history, I had been studying until the very early hours of the morning and had managed only two hours sleep before I had to rise and catch the train to take me into the University for the written examination. I fell exhausted into a deep sleep and had somehow failed to set my alarm for the 5.30 a.m. rising. Instead of being awoken with the usual jolt by the aggressive rattle of my alarm-clock I awoke to the strains of an exquisitely beautiful melody being whistled outside my bedroom window. The whistler seemed to be walking along the narrow path between the wall of the house and the fence. As my senses became more acute I marvelled at the musical clarity of the whistler. As I raised my head from the pillow I felt a presence in my room and expected to see my mother. I turned on my bed-light only to realise that it was 5.30 a.m. but my alarm had not been set. I was alone in my room and the music had ended. My mother had also forgotten to set her alarm, and the horrible consequences of what might have happened were pacified only by the memory of the beautiful melody which remained in my mind all that day and had a calming effect on me throughout the examination.

When I returned home that evening I asked Mother if she had heard the wonderful whistling in the early hours preceding my rise. "No." She had certainly not heard whistling, and pointed out that as it was coming from the path outside my bedroom window the whistler must have jumped the fence to strut up and down as there was no exit except through the laundry which was locked. The other end of the path was blocked by a high trellis fence. We both dismissed the incident until I began to sing the tune which I had heard. My mother's body stiffened on hearing the melody. She slowly turned from her meal preparations and faced me with

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tears in her eyes. “Georgette, that’s Father’s tune to Mother, where did you hear it, who taught it to you?” I could only reply that the whistler I had told her about had whistled it outside my window that morning. If he hadn’t I would have over-slept and missed the exam, which would have cancelled out the scholarship enabling me to attend University. Thank you, Grandfather. My musician’s memory enabled me to recall the tune to my aunts and uncles on later occasions. Each time I sang it to one of them they tearfully verified it to be “Father’s Tune”.

## 4

### Escape from Fantasy

Children, generally, seem to be saturated with an adult's version of fantasy. Grimm's fairy tales, Peter the Rabbit, ghosts, goblins and tooth fairies march through our ears from infancy as if children are incapable of living in a world of reality. Protect children from the harshness of reality, delay their mental growth – that way they remain the captive audience of fairy-tale tellers and all who seduce them into “happy-ever-after land”. Well, I hated fairy tales, and talking rabbits, and Winnie the boring Poo. I hated the happy endings and the prospect of Fairy Land which my mother conjured up at the drop of a baby bonnet. I was a fretful child for reasons I shall explain when I formulate the words, contain the emotions, and modify my language enough to recall those reasons. Suffice for now to accept that reality was all too clear and present to me, and fantasy was yet another example of my growing distrust of adults.

Mother would try to calm me by handing me a rose bud and encouraging me to unpeel each petal slowly. She would say, “If you sit quietly and carefully unpeel each petal, be careful not to pick off two at a time, then you will see the fairy in the centre.” I explained to her that a tightly closed rose bud was impossible to peel “one petal at a time”, and that the fairy in the centre was only the stamens of the unopened rose. My attempt at introducing Mother

to reality wasn't worth the clip on the jaw response from her. I had to play her games her way. So, sitting still, I would tear the rose bud apart and shout, "Oh yes, there goes the fairy into the garden". This response delighted my mother at her success in solving the problem of her difficult child. In adulthood I often contemplated her endless stories and prattle. In constantly talking to me she didn't need to know me. Perhaps her fear of my depressions and detached emotions were either unfathomable to her or she couldn't allow me to tell her my reality for fear that her concept of me as a ready audience might be destroyed.

An incident in this early period of my life has remained vivid and strangely precious to me. Whenever I hear a sceptic say, "There are no such things as fairies", I smile inside. Maybe fairies are around us. Maybe there is a gossamer curtain between fantasy and reality and that both exist but we have developed our mind's eye to see only reality.

One Friday night as Mother was preparing the fish and chips, we being no-meat-on-Friday Catholics, my mother ushered me out of the kitchen and told me to wait outside for my father to return from work so that I could open the back gates for him. Mother always imagined that it was my sullen looks whenever my father appeared that made him openly dislike me. She constantly made me perform little niceties to encourage an occasional kind word or smile of approval from my father towards me. Anyway, this particular night was no different from many other nights. The darkness had set in and I was happy swinging in the gloom, which encouraged me to sing lullabies to all my little creatures. Suddenly, my song was interrupted by the tapping of metal on metal. A constant clink, clink, caught my attention. I was a keen observer of insects and all animals and I was expecting the noise to be emanating from some little beastie the likes of which were constantly interrupting my gloom and filling me with delight. As

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the swing began to slow down enough for me to get off, I noticed a foggy, pale yellow light flowing from the direction of the clinking noise. I slid cautiously off the swing and approached the light on tip toes. I tended to accept strange sights and sounds without alarm. To a child, everything is experienced for the first time at some stage, and the explanation usually follows the event. On this occasion, as I came close to the area of my attention I saw a tiny old man sitting on a felled tree. He was busily hammering little nails into little leather boots with a tiny hammer. It was this action which was making the clink, clink, clink sound. He had a solemn, deeply wrinkled face. His eyes were down-cast, intent on his job. There were other smaller and much younger little people, children, running in and out of a small tree trunk house. They were laughing in high-pitched tinkling voices, and all were totally oblivious to my presence. I felt that I was the make-believe giant in a fairy tale, and they were the reality. I had no inclination to speak to them as they were not part of my world. Instead, I ran down the narrow path shrieking for Mother to come and see the tiny people. As I raced breathlessly into the kitchen Mother was removing sizzling chips from the boiling fat pan and my pleas for her to “come and see” were met with a sharp order to “stand out the way”. Mother had no interest in the extraordinary unless she was making it up herself. I left the kitchen and ran quietly up the path to visit my newly found dimension, but all was dark, all was silent again, except for the hum of a car engine approaching the back gates. Back to reality, back to real demons.

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### Childhood Companions

**A**nimals of any kind, be they large and furry, short and feathery, or slithery and creepy were always my source of comfort and intellectual stimulus, and my mother endlessly indulged my need for animal companionship.

I recall my love for birds, whether they be chickens, ducks or cockatoos. I simply loved birds and desperately longed to own a cockatoo ever since one, which sat in a cage outside a shoe-shop in Ivanhoe, bit my finger then immediately said “sorry” in a contrite voice.

My sister, Linda, who was a year older than me, was outgoing and loved human company and desperately wanted a two-wheeled bike so that she could go riding with her friend Mary O’Callaghan. Mother bought Linda a second-hand bike and asked me what I would like. In a genuine attempt not to show favouritism towards my sister, Mother said with a benevolent gesture, “You can have anything you want, so what would you like?”

Without as much as a pause for thought I said, “A horse”.

“No. Think of something else.”

“A dog.”

“No. Anything else but not a dog!”

“A cat.”

“No. If you’re not going to be sensible you’ll get nothing. Now,

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what would you like?”

“A cocky like the one at the shoe-shop.”

“No.” She did, however, allow me to acquire a budgerigar which I called “Tiny”.

Tiny and I were inseparable, except when I was at school. I tried so hard to teach her to speak but she wouldn't as much as say “ouch”, a word she should have been able to repeat considering it was all I could say when handling her. Tiny was a nippy little bird but we loved each other. She would crawl up one sleeve and emerge at my neck to perform a little bobbing dance of glee. Unfortunately our friendship ended after five years when my father tried to make the bird sit on his hand. Tiny, afraid of his tight grip nipped his finger and my father responded by flicking his finger-nail several times at her beak until it bled. The next morning, Tiny was sitting hunched on the foot of her cage. As I left for school I sadly said “goodbye, Tiny”, and a little squeaky voice replied, “goodbye”. She was dead by the time I arrived home from school, and my tears fell on her little blue feathers as I held her to my face. Adults give and adults take – and I hated my world.