

AFTER LONG ABSENCE

FOR YEARS IT HAS BRANCHED extravagantly in dreams, but the mango tree outside the kitchen window in Brisbane is even greener than the jubilant greens of memory. I could almost believe my mother has been out there with spit and polish, buffing up each leaf for my visit. I suggest this to her and she laughs, handing me a china plate.

Her hands are a bright slippery pink from the soap suds and the fierce water, and when I take the plate it is as though I have touched the livid element of a stove. In the nick of time, I grunt something unintelligible in lieu of swearing. "Oh heck," I mumble, cradling the plate and my seared fingers in the tea-towel. "I'd forgotten." And we both laugh. It is one of those family idiosyncrasies, an heirloom of sorts, passed down with the plate itself which entered family history on my grandmother's wedding day. The women in my mother's family have always believed that dishwashing water should be just on the leese of boiling, and somehow, through sheer conviction that cleanliness is next to godliness, I suppose, their hands can calmly swim in it.

I glance at the wall above the refrigerator, and yes, the needlepoint text is still there, paler from another decade of sun, but otherwise undiminished: *He shall try you in a refiner's fire.*

"Do you still have your pieces?" my mother asks.

She means the cup, saucer, and plate from my grandmother's dinner set, which is of fine bone china, but Victorian, out of fashion. The heavy band of black and pale orange and gold leaf speaks of boundaries that cannot be questioned.

"I'd never part with it," I say.

And I realize from the way in which she smiles and closes her eyes that she has been afraid it would be one more thing I would have jettisoned. I suppose it seems rather arbitrary to my parents, what I have rejected and what I have hung onto. My mother is suspended there, dishmop in hand, eyes closed, for several seconds. She is "giving thanks". I think with irritation: nothing has ever been secular in this house. Not even the tiniest thing.

"Leave this," my mother says, before I am halfway through the sensation of annoyance. "I'll finish. You sit outside and get some writing done."

And I think helplessly: It's always been like this, a seesaw of frustration and tenderness. Whose childhood and adolescence could have been more stifled or more pampered?

"But I *like* doing this with you," I assure her. "I really do." She smiles and "gives thanks" again, a fleeting and exasperating and totally unconscious gesture. "Honestly," I add, precisely because it has suddenly become untrue, because my irritation has surged as quixotically as the Brisbane River in flood. "It's one of . . ." but I decide not to add that it is one of the few things we can do in absolute harmony.

"You should enjoy the sun while you can," she says. Meaning: before you go back to those unimaginable Canadian winters. "Besides, you'll want to write your letters." She pauses awkwardly, delicately avoiding the inexplicable fact that the others have not yet arrived. She cannot imagine a circumstance that would have taken her away, even temporarily, from her husband and children. All her instincts tell her that such action is negligent and immoral. But she will make no judgments, regardless of inner cost. "And then," she says valiantly, "there's your book. You shouldn't be wasting time

. . . You should get on with your book." My book, which they fear will embarrass them again. My book, which will cause them such pride and bewilderment and sorrow. "Off with you," she says. "Sun's waiting."

I've been back less than twenty-four hours and already I'm dizzy - the same old roller-coaster of anger and love. I surrender the damp linen tea-towel which is stamped with the coats of arms of all the Australian states. I gather up notepad and pen, and head for the sun.



They are old comforters, the sun and the mango tree. I think I've always been pagan at heart, a sun worshipper, perhaps all Queensland children are. There was always far more solace in the upper branches of this tree than in the obligatory family Bible reading and prayers that followed dinner. I wrap my arms around the trunk, I press my cheek to the rough bark, remembering that wasteland of time, the fifth grade.

I can smell it again, sharp and bitter, see all the cruel young faces. The tree sap still stinks of it. My fingers touch scars in the trunk, the blisters of nail heads hammered in long years ago when we read somewhere that the iron improved the mangoes. The rust comes off now on my hands, a dark stain. I am falling down the endless concrete stairs, I feel the pushing again, the kicking, blood coming from somewhere, I can taste that old fear.

I reach for the branch where I hid; lower now, it seems - which disturbs me. Not as inaccessibly safe as I had thought.

Each night, the pale face of my brother would float from behind the glass of his isolation ward and rise through the mango leaves like a moon. I never asked, I was afraid to ask, "Will he die?" And the next day at school, and the next, I remember, remember: all the eyes pressed up against my life, staring, mocking, hostile, menacing.

There was a mark on me.

I try now to imagine myself as one of the others. I suppose I

would simply have seen what they saw: someone dipped in death, someone trailing a shadowy cloak of contamination, someone wilfully dangerous. Why should I blame them that they had to ward me off?

This had, in any case, been foretold.

I had known we were strange from my earliest weeks in the first grade. "The nurse has arrived with your needles," our teacher said, and everyone seemed to know what she was talking about. "You'll go when your name is called. It doesn't hurt."

"It does so," called out Patrick Murphy, and was made to stand in the corner.

"With a name like that," said the teacher, "I'm not surprised."

She was busy unfurling and smoothing out the flutter of consent letters which we had all dutifully returned from home, some of us arriving with the letters safety-pinned to our pinafores. The teacher singled out one of the slips, her brow furrowed.

"I see we have our share of religious fanatics," she said. She began to prowl between the desks, waving the white letter like a flag. "Someone in our class," she announced, "is a killer." She stopped beside my desk and I could smell her anger, musky and acrid and damp. It was something I recognized, having smelled it when our cat was playing with a bird, though I could not have said what part of the smell came from which creature. The teacher put her finger on my shoulder, a summons, and I followed to the front of the class. "This person," said the teacher, "is our killer."

And everyone, myself included, solemnly observed. I looked at my hands and feet, curious. A killer, I thought, tasting the double / with interest and terror, my tongue forward against the roof of my mouth.

"Irresponsible! Morally irresponsible!" The teacher's voice was like that of our own pastor when he climbed into the pulpit. She was red in the face. I waited for her, my first victim, to go up in smoke. "Ignorant fanatics," she said, "you and your family. You're the kind who cause an epidemic."

I always remembered the word, not knowing what it meant. I saw it as dark and cumulous, freighted with classroom awe, a bringer of lightning bolts. *Epidemic*. I sometimes credit that moment with the birth of my passionate interest in the pure sound of arrangements of syllables. *Epidemic*. And later, of course, in the fifth grade, *diphtheria*, a beautiful word, but deadly.

I know a lot about words, about their sensuous surfaces, the way the tongue licks at them. And about the depth charges they carry.



My mother brings tea and an Arnott's biscuit, though I have been out here scarcely an hour, and though I have not written a word. I have been sitting here crushing her ferns, my back against the mango tree, remembering Patrick Murphy: how no amount of standings-in-the-corner or of canings (I can hear the surf-like whisper of the switch against his bare calves) could put a dent in his exuberance or his self-destructive honesty.

Once, in the first grade, he retrieved my shoes from the railway tracks where Jimmy Simpson had placed them. In the fifth grade he was sometimes able to protect me, and word reached me that one of his black eyes was on my account. One day I brought him home, and my parents said later they had always believed that some Catholics would be saved, that some were among the Lord's Anointed in spite of rank superstition and the idols in their churches. But I was not seriously encouraged to hope that Patrick Murphy would be in the company of this elect. When my mother offered him homemade lemonade, he told her it beat the bejesus out of the stuff you could get at the shops. He also said that most of the kids at school were full of ratshit and that only one or two sheilas made the place any better than buggery.

One morning Patrick Murphy and I woke up and it was time for high school. We went to different ones, and lost touch, though I saw him one Friday night in the heart of Brisbane, on

the corner of Adelaide and Albert Streets, outside the Commonwealth Bank. The Tivoli and the Wintergarden ("dens of iniquity," the pastor said) were emptying and he was part of that crowd, his brushback flopping into his eyes, a girl on his arm. The girl was stunning in a sleazy kind of way: close-fitting slacks and spike heels, a tight sweater, platinum blonde hair and crimson lips. My kind of sheila, I imagined Patrick Murphy grinning, and the thought of his mouth on hers disturbed me. I rather imagined that an extra dollop of original sin came with breasts like hers. I rather hoped so.

I was praying Patrick Murphy wouldn't see me. From my very reluctant spot in the circle, I could see that his eyes were wholly on his girl's cleavage. I moved slightly, so that my back was to the footpath, but so that I could still see him from out of the corner of my eye. Our circle, which took up two parking spaces, was bisected by the curb outside the Commonwealth Bank. There were perhaps fifteen of us ranged around a woman who sat on a folding chair and hugged a piano accordion. We all had a certain *look*, which was as identifiable in its own way as the look of Patrick Murphy's sheila. My dress was . . . well, *ladylike*, I wore flat heels, I might as well have been branded. I hoped only that my face (unspoiled, as our pastor would have said, by the devil's paintbox) might blend indistinguishably with the colourless air.

At the moment of Patrick Murphy's appearance, my father had the megaphone in his hand and was offering the peace that passeth understanding to all the lost who rushed hither and thither before us, not knowing where they were going.

The theatregoers, their sense of direction thus set at naught, appeared to me incandescent with goodwill, the light of weekend in their eyes. I (for whom Friday night was the most dreaded night of a circumscribed week) watched them as a starving waif might peer through a restaurant window.

"I speak not of the pleasures of this world, which are fleeting," my father said through the megaphone. "Not as the world giveth, give I unto you . . ."

Patrick Murphy and his sheila had drawn level with the Commonwealth Bank. Dear God, I prayed, let the gutter swallow me up. Let the heavens open. Let not Patrick Murphy see me.

Patrick Murphy stopped dead in his tracks and a slow grin of recognition lit his face. I squirmed with mortal shame, I could feel the heat rash on my cheeks.

"Jesus," laughed his sheila, snapping her gum. "Will ya look at those Holy Rollers."

"They got guts," said Patrick Murphy. "I always did go for guts," and he gave me the thumbs-up sign with a wink and a grin.

At Wallace Bishop's Diamond Arcade, he turned back to blow me a kiss.

It was the last time I saw him before he hitched his motorcycle to the tailgate of a truck and got tossed under its sixteen double tyres. This happened on the Sandgate Road, near Nudgee College, and the piece in the *Courier-Mail* ran a comment by one of the priests. A bit foolhardy, perhaps, Father O'Shaughnessy said, a bit of a daredevil. Yet a brave lad, just the same, and a good one at heart. Father O'Shaughnessy could vouch for this, although he had not had the privilege, etcetera. But the lad was wearing a scapular around his neck.

Rest in peace, Patrick Murphy, I murmur, making a cross in the dust with a mango twig.

"What are you doing?" my mother asks, smelling liturgical errors.

"Doodling. Just doodling." But certain statues in churches - the Saint Peters, the faulty impetuous saints - have always had Patrick Murphy's eyes.



A few minutes later, my mother is back. "We've had a call from Miss Martin's niece in Melbourne. You remember Miss Martin? Her niece is worried. Miss Martin isn't answering her

phone so we're going over." They call out from the car: "She still lives in Red Hill, we won't be long."

Miss Martin was old when I was a child. She's ninety-eight now, part of the adopted family, a network of the elderly, the lonely, the infirm, the derelict. My parents collect them. It has always been like this, and I've lost count of how many there are: people they check in on, they visit, they sit with, they take meals to. My mother writes letters for ladies with crippled arthritic hands and mails them to distant relatives who never visit. She has a long inventory of birthdays to be celebrated, she takes little gifts and cakes with candles.

By mid-afternoon she calls. "We're at the hospital. We got to her just in time. Do you mind getting your own dinner? I think we should stay with her, she'll be frightened when she regains consciousness."

They keep vigil throughout the night.

At dawn the phone wakes me. "She's gone," my mother says. "The Lord called her to be with Himself. Such a peaceful going home."



The day after the funeral, my father and I drive out to the university.

"It's not easy," he says, "trying to get a B.A. at my age."

But there is pride, just the same, in this mad scheme I have talked him into. I have always thought of him as an intellectual *manqué* whose life was interfered with by the Depression and the Gospel - (His aunts in Adelaide never recovered from the distress. "Oh your father," they said to me sadly, shaking their heads. "He was led astray." By my mother's family, they meant. "We do wish he hadn't been taken in by such a . . . We do wish he would come back to a *respectable* religion.") - and whose retirement is now interfered with by all the lives that must be succoured and sustained. "It's hard to find time to study," he confesses ruefully.

People will keep on dying, or otherwise needing him.

In the university library, he leafs through books like an acolyte who has at last - after a lifetime of longing - been permitted to touch the holy objects. He strokes them with work-knotted fingers. But we are simply passing through the library today, we are on our way to meet friends of mine for lunch at the staff club. I am privately apprehensive about this, though my father is delighted, curious, secretly flattered. He has never been in a staff club lounge.

At the table reserved for us the waiter is asking, "red or white, sir?" and my heart sinks. The air is full of greeting and reminiscence, but I am waiting for my father's inevitable gesture, the equivalent of the megaphone outside the Commonwealth Bank. I am bracing myself to stay calm, knowing I will be as angered by the small patronizing smiles of my old friends as by my father's compulsion to "bear witness". He will turn his wineglass upside down at the very least; possibly he will make some mild moral comment on drink; he may offer the peace that passeth understanding to the staff club at large. He does none of these things.

To my astonishment, he permits the waiter to fill his glass with white wine. He is bemused, I decide, by his surroundings. And yet twice during the course of the meal, he takes polite sips from his glass.

The magnitude of this gesture overwhelms me. I have to excuse myself from the table for ten minutes.



For a week I have cunningly avoided being home with my parents for dinner, but the moment of reckoning has come. We are all here, brothers and sisters-in-law and nieces and nephews, an exuberantly affectionate bunch.

The table has been cleared now, and my father has reached for the Bible. A pause. I feel like a gladiator waiting for the lions, all the expectant faces turned towards me. It is time. The visitor always chooses the Bible reading, the visitor reads; and then my father leads family prayer.

It should be a small thing. In anyone else's home I would endure it with docile politeness.

It cannot be a concession anywhere near as great as my father's two sips of wine - a costly self-damning act.

It should be a small thing for me to open the Bible and read. There is no moral principle at stake.

Yet I cannot do it.

"I am sorry," I say quietly, hating myself.

Outside I hug the mango tree and weep for the kind of holy innocence that can inflict appalling damage; and because it is clear that they, the theologically rigid, are more forgiving than I am.

But I also move out of the shaft of light that falls from the house, knowing, with a rush of annoyance, that if they see me weeping they will discern the Holy Spirit who hovers always with his bright demanding wings.

I lean against the dark side of the mango tree and wait. A flying fox screeches in the banana clump. Gloating, the Holy Spirit whispers: *Behold the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines*. One by one, the savaged bananas fall, thumping softly on the grass. From the window the sweet evening voices drift out in a hymn. The flying fox, above me, arches his black gargoyles wings.

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