

REMEMBRANCE



FAITH RICHMOND

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In memory of Jenny Hedding (née Peverill)
who died from leukaemia on 2 May 1987.

*'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you,
love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for
thoughts . . . There's rue for you, and here's some for
me. We may call it herb of grace o'Sundays. O, you
must wear your rue with a difference. There's a
daisy. I would give you some violets, but they
withered all when my father died.'*

Ophelia

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Some of the characters in this book are real, some are imaginary and others are composites.

1

GOD AND MISS HAZELWOOD

I stand in front of the easel and dip the long thick brush into the jar of sunny yellow. I put the tip of the bristles on my tongue. The paint tastes of nothing. Then I start my father's face. I draw a beautiful round shape that when I've finished has no beginning and no end. I put the brush back and take another colour. This time I do the hair. It curves over the head and hangs down.

I think of my parents in our house next door. My mother in the garden. My father probably sitting by his study window writing. I'll paint him as I imagine him with his hair falling across his forehead; and some strands on the side reaching almost to his cheek. The eyes are next in a different colour. I do the mouth then his orange trousers. Miss Hazelwood stands beside me:

'That's a nice picture but what a funny colour for the gentleman's trousers. And what long hair you've given him. Men have short hair.'

'It's not a gentleman. It's daddy.'

'But daddies wear trousers in *this* colour.'

She takes another brush from its jar and covers the lovely orange with thick wet black. And coats my father's favourite trousers with the black paint:

'There! That's better!'

She unclips the sheet and takes it away:

'It'll be dry by the time your mother collects you.'

We sit on a square of flowered carpet:

'Cross your legs children to make room for everyone and button up your lips. Before today's song I'd like to say a very special prayer. It's for all the young men who will be going away to the war. And for the poor children in Poland who are suffering so much under the Nazis.'

My parents talk a lot about the Nazis so I know who they are. They kill people who've done nothing wrong. I look behind Miss Hazelwood as she sits on one of our little lunchtime chairs. There's the picture of Mary with baby Jesus. And above the dolls' corner beyond, hangs a portrait of the King. But the one I like best is near the blocks. It hangs in a dark wooden frame. It shows a little girl in a frilled pinafore, holding a long slender stick as she walks behind her line of geese. The birds' white cheeks are rounded and give a sweet expression to their faces. Some of them have open beaks. They waddle beside a row of dark flat-looking trees at the roadside. Voluptuous clouds above, puff and bundle along, sharing the sky with a round sun whose rays are lines that dip into the topmost leaves. Miss Hazelwood starts the song. As she sings, the little gold cross round her neck captures the light for a moment and the chain which holds it moves against her throat, its links shining too:

*'There is a happy land far, far away
Where Saints in glory stand all through the day.'*

Oh! I've heard that one! My mother sings it, so I join in. Miss Hazelwood stops suddenly and looks at us:

'Who was that? Which of you knows that song?'

I feel very important:

'My mummy sings that at home.'

'Would you like to stand up for us all?'

Miss Hazelwood smiles at me. It's hard to get up as the other children are pressed so close. I love singing but I feel the eyes of the others on me as I stand so tall among them. I hold my blue dress in tight fists at my sides:

*'There is a boarding house far, far away
Where tripe and onions cook all through the day,
Oh how the boarders yell . . . '*

Miss Hazelwood's face has changed. She shakes her head. My

stomach turns over and I tighten my grip on my dress. She looks toward me, frowning:

‘I think we’ll have to send you to the office. Those are not the correct words at all.’

I stumble through the children who sit staring up at me. My eyes prickle with tears. I can hardly see where I’m going. I wait in the office. Grown-ups are always angry and you never know why. I hear Miss Hazelwood talking gently to the children. She mentions my name. Then she starts singing the song again. I look around the room. It’s dark in here with the blind half drawn. I haven’t got a hanky so I wipe my eyes and nose on my dress. Then I cross to the window and put my chin on the sill. I can see Angela Clark’s house across the road. David Clark’s nappies flap on the verandah rail. There’s Peter Clark’s wooden billycart in the front garden. And the family’s singing bird in its cage on the porch. A dog trots by below the window not far from where I stand. The man who sharpens people’s knives goes past in his cart. The horse’s face is almost obscured by a nosebag of chaff. His owner has cut holes in a wide-brimmed hat which the horse wears, its ears black peeping triangles. I can just hear through the closed window the jingle of the harness and the man’s rough voice as he lifts a long stick in the air and flicks it on the horse’s back. Something in the sky distracts me. I look up and see a thick flock of blackbirds wheel across the roof of the Clarks’. As the birds change direction together they look, just for a moment, like short dark pencil strokes. Then they’re black dots again and grow small as a sprinkling of pepper as they disappear past distant chimney pots. There’s a burst of noise as the children in the big room next door go outside to play. I turn as Miss Hazelwood enters. She sits down behind the desk:

‘The words you sang were not very nice.’

‘Mummy sings it like that.’

I want to go to the toilet. I put my hand between my legs to hold it in.

‘When we’re singing about God we must use nice words.’

‘Mummy and daddy don’t believe about God so I don’t.’

They said it's an animal.'

I search my memory for the right word:

'A panther.'

Miss Hazelwood looks sharply at me.

'I see.'

She clasps and unclasps her hands on the desk:

'Is your mother at home now?'

'Oh yes because our baby's asleep.'

'She lets you walk home by yourself sometimes doesn't she?'

I smile at her:

'Yes, because I'm four and a half now.'

'Well I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to go home. You may not return. I'll speak to your parents this afternoon when nursery school is finished. Don't forget your hat. You may also take your painting.'

As I walk through the playground I remember the conversation last week about God. My mother and father sat in the sitting room after dinner. My sister, who's nearly six, was reading a little book her friend had lent her. She looked up at my parents:

'Why do they keep saying "God" in this story. What is God?'

My parents had laughed together and looked at each other. My mother spoke first:

'People don't know how to explain the world properly so they say that a being called God made it for us in six days.'

My sister looked astonished:

'You mean, made it *all* in six days?'

'Yes, that's why it's so silly. I can't believe that, so I don't believe in God.'

My sister had started reading again. But I saw my father smile a lot and lean toward my mother. I remember he wore his orange trousers.

'What do you say,' he said, as he touched her arm, 'perhaps we should tell her that God is a pantheist!'

I'm sitting in my usual place at the dining-room table. My father is at one end with the front half of the *Courier Mail* and my

mother is sitting on my left at this end with the back half. My sister is opposite me and watches closely everything I do. My big brother has finished breakfast and is outside making something out of wood. My blue-eyed baby brother bangs the cream-painted tray of his high-chair with a rusk.

When I move my head slightly to the left and look through the crimson part of the window, the jacaranda flowers in the back garden turn purple just in that spot and when I resume my position they go back to being blue. Sometimes I change places with my big brother and see pink chooks darting around in their run, down at the back of the long garden. My mother has gone to the dark kitchen which is next to this room and I get down from my chair, being careful not to sweep *The French Revolution*, which gives me extra height, to the floor. She's standing at the stove waiting for the eggs to boil. I hitch myself onto the kitchen table nearby and watch tiny linked bubbles streaming from three of the eggs. I lean across and put my arms around her long calico apron to butt her skinny stomach with my head. But she's too preoccupied to respond.

I can hear my father saying something softly in the next room. His paper rustles as he turns the page. We have cold sausages which my father has cut up small for me but when I blur my eyes they suddenly look like cockroaches, so I secrete them slowly and carefully into the pockets of my calico nightie while my mother is busy reading. Anyway I don't like meat much. I go to the butcher's with my mother. There are white lambs painted on the tiled walls. They gambol in green grass with pretty daisies growing and clouds above. And in the trays below are parts of their bodies. Rows of little dead pink commas that you're supposed to eat. I always shuffle in the butcher's sawdust till it's untidy and you can see the wooden floor. He shouldn't be happy. He should be sad for the lambs that can't run any more.

My father, in response to a question from my mother, leaves the table and, with his toast knife, points to a map of the world that he has on the wall near the bathroom door. My mother looks sad:

‘So that’s France and Poland. Oh dear.’

I tune in at times to my parents’ conversation but mostly I watch my baby brother in his high-chair. I plan to do a drawing of him tomorrow. My aunt has sent from Sydney some pastels that you draw with, then wet with a brush so it looks like paint. My brother’s eyes dart across the room and back as he follows a jackadandy. The cats sit on the windowsill where they catch the slight morning breeze that no one else notices. With small jerks of their heads, they too follow the darting light. It forms a concentrated quivering square almost still for a moment. Then it suddenly elongates to a blur bending at the ceiling. I look across to my father and for some reason my heart wrenches. His throat and under his chin shine softly yellow like honey on white bread as the gold cigarette case lends its colour to his skin. Then the lid snaps shut and the cats’ eyes widen momentarily as the match flares and my father draws on his cigarette.

The baby chews his now-limp rusk and drains his boat-shaped bottle. I watch him long and hard, hating and loving him and wondering if he knows that I’m not hungry or thirsty and that we are separate children. My sister asks my mother a question about growing and, as they speak together, I understand something I’ve been wondering about. Until this moment I’ve always thought that the reason our dresses get shorter is that the hems are eaten slowly in the nights by moths in the wardrobes. There’s a still moment while I absorb the startling new truth I’ve just heard. I’m aware, in this time of revelation, that both my hands clasp the bowl hard in front of me. I look at the rabbits running round its rim then through the window at my brother who’s down near the chook run with the new wooden glider he’s made. I understand what my mother and sister are saying, but with difficulty and a sense of sadness. So you grow *all* the time. But so does everyone else. The hems have nothing to do with the moths. My brother’s nearly nine and I’d always thought that one day we’d be the same age. That we’d be able to play together as big children do in the street. I won’t ever catch up.

He'll stop when he's a grown-up and so will I – but later than him. The man up in Bowen Street must have grown until he was much older. He towers over the tallest of people.

I turn to my mother and ask her what 'wretched' means – she called me that one hot day recently while we were on the verandah. She was sewing and I was breathing in the scent of her rose garden and listening to the deafening trill of the grasshoppers. Before she answers, she puts her finger on the word she is up to and glances at me, distracted:

'It means unfortunate.'

I turn back to bury my face in my glass of milk. I'm so disappointed. I'd hoped it might mean 'beautiful'. The covers of the *Revolution* shift slightly as I put my empty glass back on the table. I look at the creamed honey. It has an 'h' and another letter I recognise from my name – I think it's 't'. I turn to my father:

'What does that *little* writing say?'

He pauses in his reading:

'Twice as nice if kept on ice.'

The blue and white linen curtains bulge softly into the room as the Brisbane westerly gains strength. My mother found the material in an obscure basement shop in town and had just enough coupons to buy the last of the bolt. She found that there wasn't quite enough so she joined some old sheeting onto the bottom. Where the join showed she embroidered a line of turquoise peacocks. It's odd how you can't remember your numbers at nursery school but you know you'll always think of those peacocks. My father is buttering more toast for my baby brother. He still has a Tally Ho cigarette paper hanging by its corner from his bottom lip. My sister catches my eye and we look away quickly before we smile. Our father makes us laugh so much but we never tell him why. He smears Vegemite on the baby's toast in tiny little dib-dabs, very daintily with his huge hand. I daren't look anywhere near my sister. At other times he plays the piano. He loves the music so much that his head jerks from side to side at particular moments and tears run down his cheeks and neck. My

sister and I ache to hug him, but instead we stuff our mouths with cushions to stop laughing. My mother says my father is sentimental.

I dip my finger in the dish of marmalade then suck it just so that I can have the excruciating taste of the sip of milk that follows. Milk after bacon tastes sweet as honey but milk after marmalade is bitter as my mother's quinine. It interests me that it's not the milk's fault that it tastes so horrible. My mother says it's bath time and disappears through the adjoining door. She lights the Caliphont. It booms and roars. Water gushes into the lion-legged bath. My sister goes first and after ten minutes I step into cool, soapy, greenish water. I can sit as long as I like today. I've been suspended from nursery school because of the song. My mother talked to Miss Hazelwood and I'm allowed back in two weeks.

When I lie with my head under water, the wind, the grasshoppers, my mother's loud voice and the baby's crying, all disappear suddenly and completely. I can make deafening noises by moving the metal soap dish along the bottom of the tub. My knees though, little dry ovals like islands, must never be submerged or I'll have bad luck for the rest of my life – my sister told me that. When I surface I can hear the familiar stop-start cacophony of my mother's treadle machine. I step from the bath onto the wooden lattice mat, dry, and dress myself, remember to wet my toothbrush, and turn back to pull out the plug. The baby's screams remind me that he hates the noise. I feel a mixture of apprehension, sorrow and pleasure. My mother is comforting him and I wait to be punished for forgetting. I look at her face and I'm not sure how I feel.

She has a round garden bed on the nature strip – she calls it the frontage. It glows with sunset-pink geraniums and phlox and gerberas. When she's kneeling weeding this bed with her feet tucked under her bottom, the sight of her soles in a little vee makes me feel like crying with love – and sadness too, I think mostly sadness. My mother's famous in our suburb for many reasons:

The circular garden bed that the whole street shares with her.

Her refrigerator with its finned cylinder on top and enamelled cabriole legs.

The egg beater my father bought her. It has a metal disc which fits snugly over a specially made basin.

Because she hoses the kids with suits and slicked hair as they pass by on Sunday to the Temperance League. She aims as accurately as she can for their Bibles.

And of course for the trousers she wears. Sometimes when she brings my forgotten lunch into the playroom at nursery school, I wish she was wearing a pleated skirt like the other mothers.

My sister pushes her chair back:

‘Come on, we’ll play dollsies on the verandah till I have to go to school.’

We take our new cutout books into the sun. They’re called The Little Princesses. My sister’s is Princess Elizabeth and mine is Princess Margaret Rose. There are cardboard pages of the girls in underwear. They have dots around them and you press them out and bend back the tabs so they can stand. On thinner leaves we cut out tab-shouldered dresses for occasions such as garden parties and walks with nurse. There are nighties trimmed with a profusion of broderie anglaise and threaded with royal blue satin ribbons, and small black shoes with straps and buttons. I wish my mother would make me clothes like these. But when I ask she always says:

‘Frills and furbelows are common.’

I might think that too when I’m grown up. But I don’t now.

My mother loves cemeteries. We’re going for a steam-train ride to see one today, far away from Auchenflower. I sit on my mother’s lap so that I can see through the window. My baby brother screams whenever we go through black tunnels. Sometimes the train driver remembers to put on the carriage lights but I suppose he doesn’t always think it necessary. I can smell the

dust on the window ledge. And someone's left a half-sucked Butter Menthol in one of the corners. I'd like to put it in my mouth when we speed through one of the dark passages under the hills. I can imagine my fingers quickly prising it free – and the sweet hot taste of it on my tongue. But I think of the trouble there'll be if my mother smells it on my breath. So I leave it. But its inviting golden presence stays with me and I look at it as much as I do the scenery. Before and after the tunnels there are steep banks and cuttings. They're smothered with blue rockface plants and green creepers and seem to be only inches from the train's window.

Christmas is coming soon. It's the first time I've known beforehand. Last year I seemed to have no warning – suddenly it was Christmas Day and I was unwrapping a wooden duck on the end of a long stick. When you pushed it, the bird's painted wings would flap up and down. My baby brother plays with it now, when I let him – but the colours aren't bright anymore. I got a mouth-organ too and played it for hours until my lips were numb and tasted of tin and my head was reeling. In the train to the cemetery my father starts singing:

*'Ding dong merrily on high,
In Heav'n the bells are ringing,
Ding dong verily the sky,
Is riv'n with angels' singing.'*

He demonstrates the harmony for the Gloria part at the end and my sister copies him. They sing together. And laugh a lot. Then they practise some more and try again. And it sounds like the radio. The baby even stops crying to listen.

We arrive at the station and walk to the cemetery. My mother dashes from one headstone to another. She clambers laughing, onto oblongs of marble. And over the fancy little iron fences. She leans across to part dried grasses and to peer at gold-leaf names and dates. At one of them she stops to say to my father:

'Oh dear, look at this one – 1917, killed in action . . . so young . . . and now it's all starting again.'

She shakes her head and moves on. The baby sits on a path in his yellow, bloomed sunsuit patting the earth beside him and looking with interest at his dirty little palms. My mother strolls between the rows then stops to read out the inscriptions on two adjacent white headstones that rise at right-angles from short flower-covered mounds:

‘HENRY WILLIAM WHITE
FEBRUARY 1892 – NOVEMBER 1892
AGED NINE MONTHS.
DIED IN A FALL FROM HIS PERAMBULATOR.’

She looks then at the grave alongside:

‘Oh Norman, what a terrible thing! They were twins! Listen:

EMILY IRIS WHITE
FEBRUARY 1892 – MARCH 1893
AGED THIRTEEN MONTHS
DIED OF MELANCHOLY.’

My mother rises from her kneeling position and dusts the earth and prickles from the thick stockings she wears. She doesn’t look at any more graves but sits alone on a stone nearby and stares across the white-dotted landscape of the cemetery. I leave to join my father and sister further on. As I walk down the path toward them I wonder, with a sudden shock, if Miss Preston will be lying here soon. We went to see her last week. My mother said she’d had a stroke. At first that description of her illness sounded soft like caressing a cat. But when my sister said, ‘With one stroke of his sword the enemy’s head fell to the ground’, it suddenly had frightening overtones. When we visited her, my mother had pushed me forward and I’d leaned on tip-toe to kiss the old lady’s cheek. Her skin was fine like rice paper and felt soft as suede, but I drew back hastily in case death could be catching. We’d had apple cake brought in by her sister. It was warm from the oven. The steaming fruit was translucent and palest green with flecks