

THE MAGIC TOYSHOP

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A Virago Book

First published in Great Britain by VIRAGO PRESS 1981

Reprinted 1982, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1992 (twice),
1993, 1994, 1996 (twice), 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001

First published by W. Heinemann Ltd 1967

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 86068 190 4

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Virago
A Division of
Little, Brown and Company (UK)
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

By *Angela Carter*

Fiction

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Expletives Deleted

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The summer she was fifteen, Melanie discovered she was made of flesh and blood. O, my America, my new found land. She embarked on a tranced voyage, exploring the whole of herself, clambering her own mountain ranges, penetrating the moist richness of her secret valleys, a physiological Cortez, da Gama or Mungo Park. For hours she stared at herself, naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe; she would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her rib-cage, where the heart fluttered under the flesh like a bird under a blanket, and she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to navel (which was a mysterious cavern or grotto), and she would rasp her palms against her bud-wing shoulderblades. And then she would writhe about, claspng herself, laughing, sometimes doing cartwheels and handstands out of sheer exhilaration at the supple surprise of herself now she was no longer a little girl.

She also posed in attitudes, holding things. Pre-Raphaelite, she combed out her long, black hair to stream straight down from a centre parting and thoughtfully regarded herself as she held a tiger-lily from the garden under her chin, her knees pressed close together. A la Toulouse Lautrec, she dragged her hair sluttishly across her face and sat down in a chair with her legs apart and a bowl of water and a towel at her feet. She always felt particularly wicked when she posed for Lautrec, although she made up fantasies in which she lived in his time (she had been a chorus girl or a model and

fed a sparrow with crumbs from her Paris attic window). In these fantasies, she helped him and loved him because she was sorry for him, since he was a dwarf and a genius.

She was too thin for a Titian or a Renoir but she contrived a pale, smug Cranach Venus with a bit of net curtain wound round her head and the necklace of cultured pearls they gave her when she was confirmed at her throat. After she read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, she secretly picked forget-me-nots and stuck them in her pubic hair.

Further, she used the net curtain as raw material for a series of nightgowns suitable for her wedding night which she designed upon herself. She gift-wrapped herself for a phantom bridegroom taking a shower and cleaning his teeth in an extra-dimensional bathroom-of-the-future in honeymoon Cannes. Or Venice. Or Miami Beach. She conjured him so intensely to leap the spacetime barrier between them that she could almost feel his breath on her cheek and his voice husking 'darling'.

In readiness for him, she revealed a long, marbly white leg up to the thigh (forgetting the fantasy in sudden absorption in the mirrored play of muscle as she flexed her leg again and again); then, pulling the net tight, she examined the swathed shape of her small, hard breasts. Their size disappointed her but she supposed they would do.

All this went on behind a locked door in her pastel, innocent bedroom, with Edward Bear (swollen stomach concealing striped pyjamas) beadily regarding her from the pillow and *Lorna Doone* splayed out face down in the dust under the bed. This is what Melanie did the summer she was fifteen, besides helping with the washing-up and watching her little sister to see she did not kill herself at play in the garden.

Mrs Rundle thought Melanie was studying in her room. She said Melanie ought to get out more into the fresh air and would grow peaked. Melanie said she got plenty of fresh air when she ran errands for Mrs Rundle and, besides,

she studied with her window open. Mrs Rundle was content when she heard this and said no more.

Mrs Rundle was fat, old and ugly and had never, in fact, been married. She adopted the married form by deed poll on her fiftieth birthday as her present to herself. She thought 'Mrs' gave a woman a touch of personal dignity as she grew older. Besides, she had always wanted to be married. In old age, memory and imagination merge; Mrs Rundle's mental demarcations were already beginning to blur. She would sit, sometimes, in her warm fireside chair, at the private time when the children were all in bed, dreamily inventing the habits and behaviour of the husband she had never enjoyed until his very face formed wispily in the steam from her bed-time cup of tea and she greeted him familiarly.

She had hairy moles and immense false teeth. She spoke with an old-world, never-never land stateliness, like a duchess in a Whitehall farce. She was the housekeeper. She had brought her cat with her; she was very much at home. She looked after Melanie, Jonathon and Victoria while Mummy and Daddy were in America. Mummy was keeping Daddy company. Daddy was on a lecture tour.

'A lecher tour!' crowed Victoria, who was five, beating her spoon upon the table.

'Eat up your bread pudding, dear,' said Mrs Rundle. They ate a lot of bread pudding under Mrs Rundle's régime. She did bread pudding plain and fancy, with or without currants or sultanas or both; and she performed a number of variations on the basic bread-pudding recipe, utilising marmalade, dates, figs, blackcurrant jam and stewed apples. She showed extraordinary virtuosity. Sometimes they had it cold, for tea.

Melanie grew to fear the bread pudding. She was afraid that if she ate too much of it she would grow fat and nobody would ever love her and she would die virgin. A gargantuan Melanie, bloated as a drowned corpse on bread pudding,

recurred in her dreams and she would wake in a sweat of terror. She pushed the fatal bread pudding around her plate with her spoon and slyly shovelled most of her helping onto Jon's plate when Mrs Rundle's broad back was turned. Jonathon ate steadily. Jonathon ate largely out of pure absence of mind.

Jonathon ate like a blind force of nature, clearing through mounds of food like a tank through the side of a house. He ate until there was no more to eat; then stopped, put knife and fork or spoon and fork together neatly, wiped his mouth with his handkerchief and went away to make model boats. The summer Melanie was fifteen, Jonathon was twelve and absorbed in the making of model boats.

He was small, snub-nosed and fair, a grey-flannel-and-school-cap boy, with a healed scab, always, just at the flaking off point on one knee or the other. He made model boats from construction kits, scrupulously painting, assembling and rigging them and then placing them on shelves and mantelpieces up and down the house, where he could stare at them in passing. He made models only of sailing ships.

He made a model of the three-masted barque, H.M.S. *Beagle*; also of H.M.S. *Bounty*; of H.M.S. *Victory* and of H.M.S. *Thermopylae*. His hands, that summer, were always tacky with glue. His eyes had a far-away stare in them as if he saw not the real world, but the blue seas and coconut islands where his boats, once launched, imaginatively and forever sailed. A mental Flying Dutchman, Jonathon roved uncharted seas under a swan-spread of canvas, his feet on swaying, salt-drenched boards, never treading dry land at all. He walked with a faintly discernible nautical roll but nobody ever noticed.

And nobody ever noticed that he did not see them because his eyes were concealed by glasses with round, thick, bottle lenses. In the things of this world, he was extremely short-sighted. With his glasses and his school cap and the

scabs on his knees, he looked the sort of small boy who makes one immediately think of Norman and Henry Bones, the boy detectives. Misled by his appearance, his parents loaded his bookcase with Biggles books, which gathered dust unopened.

Early in the summer, Melanie stole six untouched Biggles books from his room, smuggled them to a town on a cheap day excursion and sold them at a secondhand bookshop in order to buy a set of false eyelashes with the proceeds. But the false eyelashes made her weep painful tears when she tried to fix them in place and then they refused to stay put but riffled through her fingers onto the dressing-table like baleful, hairy caterpillars with a life of their sinister own. Mutely, they accused her—thief! thief! Treacherous, they were the wages of sin. Melanie burned them guiltily in her rarely used bedroom hearth. It was obvious to her that they could not be worn because she had stolen to get the money to buy them. She had a well-developed sense of guilt, that summer.

Victoria had no sense of guilt. She had no sense at all. She was a round, golden pigeon who cooed. She rolled in the sun and tore butterflies into little pieces when she could catch them. Victoria was a lily of the field, neither toiling nor spinning, but not beautiful. Mrs Rundle sang old songs to her, sang how the harbour lights told me you were leaving and that roses were blooming in Picardy but there was never a rose like you; and Victoria chuckled on her knee and grabbed at Mrs Rundle's cat with her cube-shaped fist. Mrs Rundle's cat was an obese, nose-in-the-air Tom. Seated, it was the size and shape of a fur coffee table, a round one. Perhaps Mrs Rundle fed it on scraps of bread pudding.

It sat on Mrs Rundle's indoor slippers (which were yellow felt with red pom-poms) and Mrs Rundle sang to Victoria and knitted.

'What are you knitting?' asked Victoria.

'A cardigan.'

'Cardingan,' perverted Victoria with satisfaction.

'Why is it black, Mrs Rundle?' asked Melanie, come to get orange juice with ice-cubes from the refrigerator, padding on summer-naked feet.

'At my age,' said Mrs Rundle with a sigh, 'there is always someone to wear black for. If not immediately, then sooner than later.' The vowel in later came out immensely elongated, as if steamrollered flat—leeeeeeter. 'You'll catch your death, dear, with bare feet on a stone floor.'

The ice cubes shivered in Melanie's hand.

'Have you known many dead people?' she asked.

'Sufficient,' said Mrs Rundle, beginning to cast off.

'I find death inconceivable,' said Melanie slowly, fumbling for the right word.

'That is only natural at your age.'

'Sing!' commanded Victoria, beating her lollipop paws on Mrs Rundle's black silk knee. Mrs Rundle obediently lifted up her voice.

Melanie thought of death as a room like a cellar, in which one was locked up and no light at all.

'What will happen to me before I die?' she thought. 'Well, I shall grow up. And get married. I hope I get married. Oh, how awful if I don't get married. I wish I was forty and it was all over and I knew what was going to happen to me.'

She stuck moon-daisies in her long hair and looked at herself in her mirror as if she were a photograph in her own grown-up photograph album. 'Myself at fifteen.' And, following, the pictures of her children in Brownie uniforms and Red Indian outfits, and pet dogs, and summer-snapped future holidays. Buckets and spades. Sand in the shoes. Torquay? Would it be Torquay? Bournemouth (the Chine)? Scarborough-is-so-bracing? And never, for example, Venice? And the pet dogs, would they be Yorkshire terriers or corgis; or noble, hawk-nosed Afghan hounds or a pair of white greyhounds on a golden chain?

She said to the daisy girl with her big, brown eyes: 'I will not have it plain. No. Fancy. It must be fancy.' She meant her future. A moon-daisy dropped to the floor, down from her hair, like a faintly derisive sign from heaven.

Meanwhile, they lived in a house in the country, with a bedroom each and several to spare, and a Shetland pony in a field, and an apple tree that held the moon in its twiggy fingers up outside Melanie's window so that she could see it when she lay in her bed, which was a single divan with a Dunlopillo mattress and a white quilted headboard. She slept between striped sheets.

The house was red-brick, with Edwardian gables, standing by itself in an acre or two of its own grounds; it smelled of lavender furniture polish and money. Melanie had grown up with the smell of money and did not recognise the way it permeated the air she breathed but she knew she was lucky to have a silver-backed hairbrush, a transistor radio of her own, and a jacket and skirt of stiff, satisfying, raw silk made by her mother's dressmaker in which to go to church on Sundays.

Their father liked them all to go to church on Sundays. He read the lesson, sometimes, when he was at home. Born in Salford, it pleased him to play gently at squire now he need never think of Salford again. That summer, they went to church with Mrs Rundle, who was devout. She took with her her own bulging, black prayerbook which scattered old dried pressed flowers and bits of fern if she picked it up carelessly. Victoria sat on the floor of the pew, chasing idly the desiccated greenery drifting from Mrs Rundle's prayerbook and cooing. Sometimes she cooed quite loudly.

'Is Victoria retarded?' wondered Melanie. 'Will I have to stay at home and help Mummy look after her and never have a life of my own?'

Victoria, like Mrs Rochester, a dreadful secret in the back bedroom, beaming vacantly, playing with kiddie-bricks, simple constructional toys and wooden jig-saw

puzzles, pushing her indecent baby face against the banners to coo at unnerved guests.

Jonathon's favourite hymn was 'Eternal Father, Strong to Save'. Whenever the vicar, a pale man who fished and made pale jokes about fishers of men, came to keep the eye on them all which he had promised their father, Jonathon would grip the hem of his cassock fiercely and request that 'Eternal Father, Strong to Save' should be sung the next Sunday.

'We'll see,' the vicar would say, ill at ease beneath the intense glare of Jonathon's spectacles.

All Sunday breakfast and best-dressing time, Jonathon quivered with suppressed anticipation. But, more often than not, the hymn was not sung. Hope faded the moment he saw the hymn numbers posted in the wooden slots on the wall. Then Jonathon climbed aboard the tea clipper *Cutty Sark* or H.M.S. *Bounty* and cast off with a fresh breeze swelling the sails, and steered out across the blue, blue sea, nursing his hurt. The vicar had betrayed him. Gag him with a marline spike. To the mizzen-topmast, keep him there all day—naked, during the long tropic day. Give him a taste of the cat.

Melanie prayed: 'Please God, let me get married. Or, let me have sex.' She had given up believing in God when she was thirteen. One morning, she woke up and He wasn't there. She went to church to please her father and she wished on wish-bones as well as on her knees. Mrs Rundle prayed, astonishingly: 'Please, God, let me remember that I was married as if I had really married.' For she knew she could not fool God by virtue of the deed poll. 'Or at least,' she continued, 'let me remember that I had sex.' Only she phrased it less bluntly. Mrs Rundle became abstracted from time to time during the service as she wondered how the roast beef and potatoes left at home in the oven were getting on. But she always apologised when she returned in mind to God.

Neither Jonathon nor Victoria prayed, having nothing to pray for. Victoria tore the fringes off the hassocks and ate them.

Melanie was fifteen years old, beautiful and had never even been out with a boy, when, for example, Juliet had been married and dead of love at fourteen. She felt that she was growing old. Cupping her bare breasts, which were tipped as pinkly as the twitching noses of white rabbits, she thought: 'Physically, I have probably reached my peak and can do nothing but deteriorate from now on. Or, perhaps, mature.' But she did not want to think she might not be already perfect.

One night, Melanie could not sleep. It was late in the summer and the red, swollen moon winked in the apple tree and kept her awake. The bed was hot. She itched. She turned and twisted and thumped her pillow. Her skin prickled with wakefulness and her nerves were as raw as if a hundred knives were squeaking across a hundred plates in concert. At last, she could bear it no longer and got up.

The house was heavy with sleep but Melanie was wide awake. She felt strangely excited to be up and about when they all slept; she imagined a trail of zeds ... zzzzz ... issuing from their three sleeping mouths like bees and buzzing dreamily around the house. She wandered idly into her parents' empty room. Shoes under the bed waited patiently for her mother's returning feet, an empty tobacco tin pined on the bedside table for her father to come back and throw it away. The room was lit completely by the moon; the white crochet cover on the low, wide bed glowed in the moonlight with a pregnant luminosity. Her parents slept in this bed, which was generous and luxurious as a film star's.

Leaning over the wicker heart which formed the bedstock, Melanie tried to imagine her parents making love. This seemed a very daring thing to think of on such a hot night. She tried hard to picture their embraces in this bed

but her mother always seemed to be wearing her black, going-to-town suit, and Daddy had on the hairy tweed jacket with leather elbow-patches which, together with his pipe, was his trade mark. His pipe would be tucked into the breast pocket while they did it. Melanie tried but could not imagine her parents' nakedness. When she thought of her mother and father, their clothes seemed part of their bodies, like hair or toenails.

Her mother, in particular, was an emphatically clothed woman, clothed all over, never without stockings whatever the weather, always gloved and hatted, ready for some outing. A wide-brimmed brown velvet hat with a black ribbon rose at the side superimposed itself on Melanie's picture of her mother being made love to. Melanie remembered that, when she was a little girl and her mother cuddled her, the embraces were always thickly muffled in cloth—wool, cotton or linen, according to the season of the year. Her mother must have been born dressed, perhaps in an elegant, well-fitting caul selected from a feature in a glossy magazine, 'What the well-dressed embryo is wearing this year.' And Daddy—Daddy was always the same; tweed and tobacco, nothing but tweed and tobacco and type-writer ribbon. Of these elements, he was compounded.

Her parents' wedding photograph hung over the mantelpiece, where the familiar things seemed exotic and curious in the light of the moon. The French gilt clock, for instance, which told her parents' time and had stopped at five minutes to three on the day after they left for America. Nobody had bothered to wind it up again. Next to the clock was a Mexican pottery duck, bright, gay and daft, its blue back splotched with yellow flowers. Her mother had bought it after seeing its photograph in a Sunday colour supplement. Melanie wandered over to the mantelpiece, picked up the pottery duck and put it down again, and raised her eyes to the wedding photograph.

On her mother's wedding day, she had had an epiphany

of clothing. So extravagantly, wholeheartedly had she dressed herself that her flying hems quite obscured Melanie's father. One could only see his shy grin, misted over with blown tulle, and Melanie could not tell whether, as she suspected, he was wearing the leather-patched tweed jacket even on his wedding day, because he could not take it off. But her mother exploded in a pyrotechnic display of satin and lace, dressed as for a medieval banquet.

Cut low in front to show a love-token locket nestling in the hollow of her throat, her white satin dress had scooping sleeves, wide as the wings of swans, and it flowed out from a tiny waist into a great, white train, arranged around in front of her for the photograph so that the dress appeared as if reflected in a pool of itself. A wreath of artificial roses was pressed low down on her forehead and a fountain of tulle sprang up and around it and spouted in foam past her waist. She carried a bunch of white roses in her arms, cradled like a baby. Her smile was soppy and ecstatic and young and touching.

She was surrounded by relations of whom they had seen less since Daddy had done so well with the novel and then the biography and then the film and so on. Aunt Gertrude, too tight perm, awkward feet in too tight shoes, grasping a shiny, patent leather handbag like the week's groceries. Melanie remembered the Ashes of Violet flavoured kisses of her Aunt Gertrude from the few family Christmases when Grandfather (scowling at the camera as if he expected it to gobble his soul) was alive. Good-bye, Grandfather. Good-bye, Auntie Gertrude. And good-bye brilliantined Uncle Harry with Auntie Rose on his arm. Rouged Auntie Rose. The round patches of rouge came out black in the photograph. She might have been a sweep they asked along for luck. Good-bye, Uncle Philip.

Unlike the rest, Uncle Philip did not smile at the camera. He might have strayed into the picture from another group, an Elks' solemn reunion or the grand funeral of a

member of the ancient and honourable order of Buffaloes, or, even, from a gathering of veterans of the American Civil War. He wore a flat-topped, curly-brimmed, black hat such as Mississippi gamblers wear in Western films and a black bootlace tie in a crazy bow. His suit was black, his trousers tight, his jacket long. But the final effect was not of elegance. Under the black hat, his hair seemed to be white, or, at least, very fair. He had a walrus moustache which concealed his mouth. It was impossible to guess his age. However, he seemed old rather than young. He was tall and of a medium build. His hands were clasped before him on the silver knob of an ebony cane. His expression was quite blank; too blank, even, to seem bored. Mother's only brother. Her only relative living, for all the others were father's family. And he could not even raise a smile at his sister's wedding. It seemed churlish of him.

Melanie had never seen Uncle Philip. Once, when she was a little girl, he sent her a jack-in-the-box. He was a toymaker. When she opened the jack-in-the-box, a grotesque caricature of her own face leered from the head that leapt out at her. That year, her parents had sent him one of their printed Christmas cards showing themselves and Melanie (Jonathon not yet born) sitting smiling at the window of the little mews cottage they had recently bought, almost in Chelsea. Her father was beginning to make a name and money. And, in return, came this horrid toy. The jack-in-the-box frightened Melanie very much indeed. She had nightmares about it regularly into the New Year and, intermittently, until Easter. Her mother threw the jack-in-the-box away. Her parents agreed the gift was thoughtless and in bad taste. No cards were sent to Uncle Philip after that. The tenuous contact was lost for good.

Photographs are chunks of time you can hold in your hand, this picture a piece of her mother's best and most beautiful time. Her smiling and youthful mother was as if stabbed through the middle by the camera and caught for

ever under glass, like a butterfly in an exhibition case. Melanie, looking at the photograph, thought that Uncle Philip had no place in this fragment of her mother's happy time. He was a colour which clashed; or, rather, a patch of no colour at all. He occupied a quite different time. He looked as if he had met an ancient mariner on the way to the wedding and been catapulted into a dimension where white roses and confetti did not matter any more.

'Well,' thought Melanie, 'I don't suppose I shall ever see him.'

She examined the wedding dress more closely. It seemed a strange way to dress up just in order to lose your virginity. She wondered if her parents had sexual intercourse before they were married. She felt she was really growing up if she had started to speculate about this. Daddy must have been a bit of a Bohemian, in spite of his family and, besides, was living in a flat by himself. A Bloomsbury bedsitter, coffee brewing on a gas-ring, talk about free love, Lawrence, dark gods. Had he already sacrificed his smiling bride to the dark gods? And, if so, would she still be smiling, since it was her mother? And would she have dressed herself in virginal white? What about the letters in the women's magazines which Melanie borrowed secretly from Mrs Rundle?

'My boy friend says he will leave me unless I let him love me to the full but I want to be honestly married in white.'

Symbolic and virtuous white. White satin shows every mark, white tulle crumples at the touch of a finger, white roses shower petals at a breath. Virtue is fragile. It was a marvellous wedding-dress. Did she, Melanie wondered for a moment, wear it on the wedding night?

Her mother was a woman of sentiment. In a trunk starred with faded stickers from foreign places, under a piece of Indian embroidery thrown over it to conceal it prettily, there lay the wedding-dress, all treasured up, swathed in blue tissue to keep the satin white. What did she keep it for? Would she be laid out in it or wear it up to