

WHEN I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD or thereabouts, my mother put me on a small plane and sent me to stay with my grandparents on the farm where she and her siblings were born and raised. I had always been going to this place. It was home in the way our red-brick house on the Northern Beaches of Sydney never was. Normally my mother would drive five hours over the mountains, into the western sun, while her husband worked his way into his ambitions. She would go home when she could no longer face the task of raising us, my brothers and me; she would go home when she could no longer *manage*.

To have been put on the plane alone meant there must have been some sort of escalation beyond the ordinary level of crisis we lived under. Perhaps my grandmother said, 'Send Maggie to me, it will be one less.' Now, more than forty years on, I

sense in my dispatch west something else, an undercurrent of relief, guilt, shame, gratitude.

On the same flight out of Sydney was a labrador-cross Rhodesian ridgeback puppy. A gift from my uncle, who lived in Queensland, to my grandfather. The puppy was ink-black with a white star on his chest and would be the last in a long line of labradors my grandfather kept.

We arrived, the puppy and I, a little travel-crumpled and air sick. My grandmother was standing beside the hangars waving as we circled to land. She of the soft skin, scent of powder, aura of order. We drove past the cemetery, down the dirt road, across the cattle grid and up the track to the house on the hill. I put my things in the drawers prepared for me, each lined with pretty paper and containing a few twists of lavender sewn in a fine linen pocket. I felt special. Grown-up. My grandmother, Mannie, called me for tea at the kitchen table. Joe, the puppy, had a raw egg and some milk and I had a rock cake from the battered biscuit tin. Nothing was broken. No chairs were upset. No milk was spilt. I didn't miss my mother or my brothers. I never even thought of my father.

Elbows propped on the scrubbed pine of the table, my grandmother poured a cup of tea for each of us from the pot with its knitted cosy.

It was different being there on my own, without my mother or brothers. We usually stayed in the self-contained flat that jutted at right angles off the eastern end of the veranda. It had been designed by Mannie, and its big windows brought the paddocks and garden inside, in a way the house, with its

deep veranda, couldn't do. From my bed in the little closed-in breezeway all I had to do was lift a corner of the curtain and I could see the garden. But now I was staying in the house, in my grandmother's sewing room. My bed was made up with flannel-ette sheets, a woollen blanket, and topped with a red silk quilt. Everything ironed crisp, just so. The house was small, but I didn't realise that then. With its pitched roof and that deep veranda, it felt washed with space. It sat in the middle of its world, looking north over rolling paddocks and hills stacked upon hills. To the south stretched emerald-green lucerne flats through which the creek snaked, its passing marked by the duller green of she-oak and eucalypt. All around the great expanse of sky.

This stay laid a deep foundation for a rhythm of life that made sense in a way the life we lived in the suburbs did not. I think of my small self, separated from my mother and brothers, but held between land and sky in this place.

A lot of things about our life in the suburbs did not make sense to five-year-old me. My father, himself a farmer's son, was rarely home. What he did was mysterious. On the occasions he was in the house he would work for hours at his desk, at tasks so important we were never to disturb him. Bottle-green bags stamped with the Australian coat of arms followed him from place to place. They were full of papers that required his signature. This work was so important that nothing must get between him and it. He loved it, more than he loved us, or so it seemed. He was a rare creature, my father, and in the way of things seldom seen, he was dazzling, so it was hard to take him in all at once. He would arrive and the familiar water of our family pond would

slush as we shuffled ourselves around to try to make some space. We danced for him, in some sort of attendance, our movement tinged with resentment. Yet even as we resented him there was also a deep desire to please. This push and pull creased me in ways I did not understand.

The 'us', my real family, the one familiar with the shared water of that pond, was my mother, my two brothers and me.

My brothers have eyes of blazing blue, thick brown hair and fair skin that burns and freckles. One of them is tall, the other threatened to be so. They love food and music. They love people and watching TV. They are extroverts eager to meet and be met.

My older brother has pebbles in his mouth instead of words. His tongue is thick. It sticks out when it shouldn't. At this time I am remembering, he smashed and grabbed and pinched and pulled and broke the world every day, over and again. His skin was too thin and everything moved through him so quickly it spun him ever faster until he fixed on just one thing and held it tight for hours. When we ignored him he used his shit to make his presence known. He would paint with it, smear it over the walls of his bedroom, walk it across the floor, let it sag in his pants, hot and stinking. He didn't care what people thought. He used the shit and the not-caring more eloquently than words. Because of him I learnt how to read a body. Because of him I understood shame. Because of him, for a long time I believed in miracles. Because of him I learnt that the shape of love is loss.

My younger brother has songs in his mouth as well as words. He too was hostage to the world of shit our mother cleaned up

day after day. He, like me, knew the smell was there, under the soap. The smell of difference.

Our father's answer to the none-too-perfect conundrum of our family life was to touch down and take off again. He never really came home. When he appeared at the door it was to change. If he had a little bit of time between appointments he'd take off his jacket, perhaps loosen his tie and roll up his sleeves. Or he would shower and emerge again with his costume altered slightly by a set of cufflinks, a different tie, or a dinner suit. While waiting for our mother to feed, bathe and put us to bed he would watch the news standing up, or talk on the phone in his study. On the rare weekend he was home he would have a break from his important work, dress in his tennis whites and roar off in his small fast car that had room for only one passenger. It never occurred to me to question why it was important for my father to have a proper break from work and do something he loved when my mother didn't even have a favourite TV show.

Like an actor or a magician, my mother would change in the wrinkle of time she had between scenes. One moment jeans and a shirt stained with domestic grime and evidence of whatever my brother had destroyed that day, the next transformed, in a silk dress of richest green, or a long black skirt, her hair swept up, a slash of bright lipstick, her clip-on pearl earrings, a matching clutch, and she was out the door off into the night only to return smelling of stale rooms, powdered ladies and smoke. She would always come straight to check on us in our beds and tuck a single after-dinner chocolate under our pillow. The crinkle of black paper and the hint of sweet mint meant all was well.

I'm hunting for the memories of my mother and me when I was young. There are not that many and those I have feel like carefully polished origin stories rather than memories, like memories constructed from a photo rather than ones that were truly alive. Mostly she exists trailing in the wake of my brother, snatched at by his hands, pulled forward into him, swallowed by all the things he could not do.

So, what my grandparents gave me was even more precious.

My grandparents' routine, the way the day unfolded, couldn't have been more different from the chaos of our family life. Instead of waking to my brother's bangs and cries to be let out of his room, I would hear my grandfather pushing the tray-mobile, a little wheeled trolley, up the long hall. His progression – from kitchen to bedroom – was heralded by the 7 a.m. ABC news bulletin. I would lie buried beneath the covers, as, faint at first and then louder, he and the trolley approached my room and on up the hall until they reached my grandparents' bedroom. They would have their first cup of tea of the day, listen to the news and weather report and then, after the pot was empty, they would dress and my grandmother would pop her head around my bedroom door. Had I slept? Was I hungry?

We would have porridge for breakfast. There was a glass jar filled with stewed fruit, a bowl with bran in it and a jug of creamy milk. Nothing was knocked over.

After breakfast I would go with my grandfather. Out the back, where, beyond the garden gate, his dogs were tied up. He'd let them off their chains and they'd run like moths circling a light. He'd hunt them off and we'd walk back to the house

and carefully reverse the ute out of the garage. The ute was increasingly dented as his eyesight failed, but I was too young to notice his slow pace, and it suited my curiosity. And so we inched into the day.

Of all my cousins, I think I had the best of my grandfather. He could be hard and gruff, and he aged fast after his second hip operation, but this was a time before then when he still moved with the help of only one stick. Perhaps it was my obsession with animals that softened him. We would spend the morning together and he'd tell me stories about horses he'd owned and dogs he'd trained and sheep he'd shown. I was just the right audience, too young to challenge him and old enough to stay interested in his meandering, moral-filled stories. What I didn't understand was that my grandfather was in the difficult process of letting go of his small empire and allowing his son-in-law and my aunt to take it over. The tension washed against me; I felt it, and discomfit, but my surroundings there were too absorbing and distracting. So if my grandfather was cranky, it was because of the hip or the weather, not a decision my uncle had made.

My grandfather's farm at that time was a Suffolk sheep stud. He raised stud rams to sell to lamb producers. Older now, his focus was on his show team, which he would take to the big sheep shows in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. Together every morning we would feed the rams.

The ram shed was the old woolshed. There was a small board, which is what the floor where the sheep are shorn is called, and here the feed bins stood. My grandfather would scoop freshly cut lucerne chaff into the big steel mixing bin, then with a heavy

shovel he would mix a bucket of golden oats. Finally, he would pour a thick molasses syrup melted in hot water boiled in the old kettle. Outside the shed, stamping, banging, jostling, were the stud rams. I would bend over that steel bin, my feet off the floor, my head buried in the sweet mix of lucerne, molasses and oats, and mix until my grandfather got sick of me and told me it was enough. I would line up the buckets, made from old kerosene tins with handles of wire, and he would fill them. Then together we would empty the feed into the wooden troughs. When the troughs were full I was sent to open the gate with a warning to mind that I wasn't trampled.

I can conjure that shed. It's as real today as it was forty years ago. The smell of sheep sweet and sour, the feel of smooth wood polished with the lanolin that hung on the edge of the sheep, the dust motes dancing in the early morning light, the powdered dirt, the swallows' mud nests and the rams.

After the initial rush to the troughs, the rams would settle and stop jostling for a better position. My grandfather would lean on his stick and watch. His stillness was a lesson. He was looking for lameness or a drop in condition, noting which animal was muscling up, which one had a presence and perfection of confirmation that might make him a champion. He'd take out his notebook, always in his top pocket, always with the stub of a pencil shoved into its spine; he'd wet the nib of lead with his tongue and write. I must have got bored, but I don't remember that. I do remember the peace of learning to see and not be seen.

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I don't know how long I stayed with my grandparents. It was so removed from my other life, the one where my brother was spinning through the world, the one where the days were loud. I realise my visit has perhaps grown longer than the reality. But I also realise that the time gave me a touchstone, a safe place, a template of how I wanted to live. As a child I had no doubt where I would make my life – it was on my grandparents' farm, doing my grandfather's work.

That this didn't happen came as a shock only to me. Everyone else saw broader horizons, ambitions not yet discovered; they saw love and diversion. They, my parents, insisted I was destined for something beyond this place (after all, both of them had worked hard to leave farming behind) and that I would forget.

I did grow up and away. I lost sight of my simple child self and her clear vision. I married young. We lived adventurously. We hiked and climbed and paddled in Alaska, returned to Australia briefly to have our daughter and then went back to North America, where we adventured more. When we came back again to Australia my husband fell ill and died, leaving me to birth our son and raise our children alone. I faced my future as a single parent. I worked all the hours of the day and night. Dived into my career. I gathered research students. I wrote courses. I signed a book contract. I was climbing that ladder. Then my mother, herself blossoming into her role as grandmother and adored by my children, was diagnosed with cancer and nine weeks later she too was dead.

Though I wore the cloak of 'ambitious academic', actually I was drowning. I was barely making enough money. My daughter

was afraid to go to sleep at night. My toddler son was so fierce he scared me. To have a moment alone I would lock myself in the bathroom, get under the shower and try to drown out the sounds of him beating his head against the door. The promise I had made in the moments after he was born to be first his mother seemed impossible to keep in the face of just how expensive it was to live on one income in Sydney.

Rudderless, I sought wisdom. I went to see a friend's mother, who was a psychotherapist. We sat in the dappled sunlight of this woman's inner-city courtyard and I told her I wanted to go back to the farm. My grandparents were both dead. My aunt and uncle were farming there. My friend's mother poured tea and asked me, why not? And I laid out all the reasons. No financial security. No career. Leaving my younger brother to cope with my older brother. Fear. The reasons stacked up. But I walked out of that courtyard with permission to go.

I took my children back to that country. And it held us while we healed.

Everyone who expected a different future for me is gone. My grandparents, my mother and father. So too the farm – sold recently. But not before I had the chance to lay the same foundation in my children. I took an exit ramp out of the city and gave my kids a world ordered by seasons, by wet and dry; I taught them that in beauty is redemption.

I left the farm before it was sold and chose to move to Tasmania with a new partner, a man who had another sort of farm, in a very different country. I moved because I wanted more. But when I arrived I thought this country might not

be enough. That I would never feel myself known here. I have no familial connection. No handed-down knowledge. I'm a newcomer. What I've learnt, or rather what I'm learning, is that to be received in a place I must be alert, open. And I must be quiet.

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