

## DOWN TO DUST

My father became anxious and fearful if he found himself alone and so he liked to make himself snug with people and pets and bustle. I can remember the pets that we children had: a dopey Labrador pup, my silkworm in a shoebox, a terrapin, Bluey and Curly hooking their claws on the aviary near the rose trellis, my sister's horse books, saddle and reins, and on the back porch there were always enamel plates with chipped edges, flecked with rings of milk gone sour and scabs of food missed by blind tongues. Moby Duck floated in the bath until his wooden bottom suppurated with soapy water like the paddle my mother used for poking at clothes boiling in the copper. I was allergic to Bluey but not to Curly for some reason. I was ten years old then, in 1950.

And yet it was within the security of our guardianship that my father made his worst mistakes, showed us his most abject side. For my ninth birthday in 1949 I was given the Labrador pup. I named her Gypsy: I could not see that she lacked gypsyish qualities. "Hello Dopey," my father would say, pulling her ears. "You're a real dope, Dopey." Calling things by the wrong name was one of the things that exasperated us about him. "Her name's Gypsy," said my mother. "Everyone else calls her Gypsy. No one calls her Dopey. People who visit don't know what you mean when you say Dopey. Gypsy herself gets confused. Gypsy's name is Gypsy and has been ever since we got her. She's not your dog. Gypsy."

My father gently boxed the foolish snout resting on his knee and adopted a mulish look. "She looks dopey," he said. "She acts dopey."

When Gypsy got skittled by a car in her third year we buried her in the back yard by the mulch heap. I marched up and down the grave in my rubber boots, flattening the soil, feeling noble in bereavement and almost wishing it were for a parent or sibling: unfortunately I have always needed drama and regard. My father came out of the gardening shed with a small pine slab the colour of hair. He tapped it into the compacted soil with the back of an axe and I could feel the sharpened end searching out Gypsy's head somewhere below. A long splinter almost peeling off bisected the large letter 'D' he had carved with a

chisel. He smoothed back the splinter with his thumb and the same mulish look.

“Hart,” said my mother, “take it out again, remove the ‘D’, and put the correct name on.”

In the end I put in my own stake with ‘Gypsy’ in red ink staining a weathered piece of card paper.

“I miss that dog,” my father came to say. “That dog wouldn’t have hurt a fly.”

I think the war must have been a persistent smudge on my parents’ lives, and I was there right at the beginning. My mother has a photograph of herself with my father on a railway station platform somewhere, taken in January 1940. He is in uniform, smiling from out of the refuge of a crowd of other soldiers, and my mother has her hair like a film star’s and her thighs resting against my father’s in a warm gesture of giving. Photographs were tiny in those days but I know, from the scratchy date inked in on the back of the photograph and the newness and shyness of my parents’ embrace, that I had been kernelling inside my mother for at least three weeks when the photograph was taken.

Money was often tight after the war. “Come on, kids,” said my father, “get in the car. I have to do some business in the city.” We were all dressed in our best, and spent the morning shopping, having haircuts and going to the pictures to see an Abbott and Costello. We had lunch in the cafeteria of the main department store. The government had reluctantly released various goods from ration control in the past couple of years even though the war had been over for four years. The people in the cafeteria wanted a change. They sat at the little tables impatient with austerity. They were waited on by dark Yugoslav women who had husbands driving graders in the interior or up in the mountains.

My mother opened her handbag and took out a small fountain pen to make notes. She wrote out cheques and put them in envelopes and gave them to my father. “On your way to the bank this afternoon can you pay these for me?” she said. “I’ll do some more shopping and take the kids to the museum.” He looked numb with apprehension at the thought of his afternoon in a bank manager’s office asking for a loan.

Our overcoats were hanging on a coat-stand near our table. A man in a dinner suit held the coats while we put them on. My father shook himself into optimism, clapped his hands and rubbed them together, and slapped a sixpence on the table. “Thank you for your gracious service,” he said, gesturing no, please don’t do that, when the man gave a deep bow.

We were taken to the museum by way of the smartest, busiest shopping streets. My mother was looking for signs of the war and could not find any. "But you just look along here," she said, taking us down a little side street. On a blighted empty lot was a heap of sandbags mucky with stains and weeds. In a shop window a tailor had abandoned a bolt of drab cloth and a picture of a man who looked half complete: "Victory Suit: 38 coupons". Some windows had been painted over or criss-crossed with strips of tarry paper. "It was very dangerous at night," said my mother, telling us about her sister killed by a car one night during the brownout.

We walked into sunlight, our backs to the past, and marched into the museum. My father met us on the front steps at four o'clock. We watched him walk up the hill, his back straight although leaning forward would have made it easier to walk, and he had undone the knot of his tie. He did not seem to belong anywhere. "Well, you look like you're shickered," said my mother brightly.

He stopped and rubbed his face with both hands in a washing motion. "Might even bloody start on it when I get home," he said. "No point in doing anything else."

I sat with my sister in the back seat of the car. She was young, cross and tired. "For Christ's sake shut up the pair of you," said my father, turning round and slapping at our legs as we contorted to escape him.

"Hart," my mother said.

He tooted the horn and swore at people. He put on the brakes, accelerated, braked again, and so our progress was jerky along those streets my mother had glowed upon two hours earlier.

Near the business district a dark, clever man got out of his car, looked straight at us, buttoned his ashy-grey suit coat over his white shirt and deep blue tie, reached into his car for a long, belted overcoat and fastened its buttons and belt, and drew fine black gloves from his pocket; wit and grace and certainty on his face. Through the open window of our car I heard his car door close like a secretive footstep on gravel.

"Just look at him," said my father who had been burping loudly and not saying pardon me. "Just look at him, would you? Bloody sis with his coat and gloves, thinks he's the ant's pants. Useless bloody silver-spooned mincing bastard. Just look at him. Oh, oh, oh, I do believe there's a teensy weensy bit of fluff on my sleeve. Well, what *shall* I do for the rest of the day. A sundowner with old Eric? Buy a painting? Squeeze a boy's bum?"

“Hart,” said my mother. “That’s enough.”

She loved him but he exhausted her. But I remember the way she unfolded a globey breast for her two late babies, her alarming beauty when she dressed in black to go to balls, the way she drove a car like the men of those days, with an elbow out the window, a cigarette streaming smoke from the other hand on the steering wheel, and one finger lifted to greet on-coming cars. I don’t remember her ever looking rattled.

I used to exhaust my own wife — or so she said a few weeks ago: “I just got tired of making all the decisions all the time.” I had not seen Georgina for over a year and I suppose she had decided enough time had passed. I idly wondered how she was getting on with Alan, and asked myself if I cared or not, decided that I did, but suppressed the thought. I told myself to be realistic. She did not have that speculative look in her eye and besides, at the end of the visit she just happened to ask if she could ring Alan to say she would be late, and she cloaked the receiver with her hand and said something into it in a chuckling murmur about be sure to save her some lobster.

But, apart from that we had a pleasant time talking about the kids and life in general, Alan mostly not mentioned. I could see the Jaguar that Alan had given her parked outside and she caught my look and smiled. “It’s got nice lines, hasn’t it,” she said. We voted in different electorates now but still felt the same about things. “You should have seen the look on the Liberal fellow’s face,” she said. “I parked the Jag. right outside the polling booths, walked right past the Liberal fellow, and took a how-to-vote card from the Labor fellow.”

Oh well. Things are all right for her now, and having money will save her from having to make decisions.

I think my mother may have gone away for a short time once. I remember a snapping hot week when I was about twelve, and our family and some uncles and aunts and cousins drove to a high gabled guesthouse in the mountains for a holiday. Something was wrong. My bright, combative mother could scarcely manage to talk to us and she hid in cavernous armchairs in shadows in the lounge, looking like a discarded great-aunt with a book in her lap. I myself felt that I was someone else in that guesthouse when I sat in a glowing corner of the dining-room on stained-glass mornings, spooning marmalade from a filigreed silver bowl, the awful eyes of a stag at bay on the wall somewhere behind me.

We trooped into the lounge after breakfast to find her but she would not look at us until our sulking or cajoling got too much for her, and then she would raise her head and we would

glimpse a baffling pain in her eyes. She backed away from us into her books and a great lassitude settled upon her.

My father panicked. Trembling with courage in the face of her withdrawal he became a raconteur at mealtimes, leaped for impossible balls with his racquet, charmed old ladies, and dallied with the not-too-much-of-a-risk waitress, one eye always on my mother.

I can't decide whether I made use of the confidences being made to me at that time and therefore have never forgotten them, or if the things that have gone wrong for me lately have made me more perceptive about the past. But I do think I knew that my father would never gamble with the risky waitress for that might be too certain of succeeding, and yet a rebuff from her would matter too much as well. And I finally saw in my mother's eyes the plea, *Let me be*, and the reassurance, *It's not you Hart; it's not you, dear*, things my father did not see.

She may have gone away for a short time then, I can't remember, and I don't know what she said to my father. Eventually they came to live in mettlesome community with one another. She had her work: every day she faced forty boys and girls who looked more or less alike and if ever I went shopping with her little girls would wave and yell out hello from the other side of the street. She often held meetings in our house because it was a big house, fit for sprawling in, its buckled veranda facing a broad park and at the back there was a licheny fish pond and half an acre of old trained roses on trellises, hydrangeas, and shrubs arresting one another. Men in beards and women dressed in slacks often sprawled on our lounge-floor to help her talk about getting Mr Calwell elected. She was so busy she allowed me and my father transgressions and rarely said no to anything. Perhaps, too, there was more to her friendship with the branch president, a man she seemed to admire. My father, of course, was happy among all those people on our floor and perhaps was not letting himself think beyond that.

But even if you do sense a warning sign in someone you love what are you going to do about it? Georgina once came with me into a branch of our bank in an old working-class suburb. This was about two years ago: we had been married for twenty years, were prosperous and successful, and the kids grown up. She stood chatting with me in the queue about things that earned us looks and, as the queue moved along, she said something, as she had once or twice before, about the barrister her firm had hired: "Alan's got the best brain I've ever met." She has a habit of narrowing her eyes in a considered frown and

I knew what it was that she was really saying. I loved her full skirt and her glossy hair pulled back. She liked standing next to me because I wore my leather *blousson* and expensive trousers and shoes. We were like a royal couple, except that no homage was paid. There was only a soreness and patience from the people in the queue, bent, blown up, shrunken and old from lead in their systems and starch in their diets and no cheer in their jobs. "I'd like to invite him to dinner next week," she said. "Do you mind?"

I don't have any pets now and the only pet Georgina and I had was a cat for the children, but a cat is inextricably there in Georgina's lap in all my memories of her, her eyes half-lidded, her long legs drawn up on a couch, her skirt mantling her knees, kind and impenetrable, saying no to something.

When my father turned fifty he got vain and we all teased him. He started by growing his sideburns to please Georgina after she had said something when we went to visit my parents one Sunday, but then he went several stages farther. He bought jeans, a belt, a corduroy coat with leather elbow patches, and a pair of rimless glasses. He grew his hair longer. He and my mother went to most of the Vietnam Moratorium marches, got separated, and he ended up holding a girl's hand or linking with her arm as they sat in the road or marched down it. That is, I did find him like that once, and I hid until the marchers dispersed, giving time for a look of fulsome concupiscence to leave his face before making my way around to poke his corduroy shoulder and say, "This is good to see, the old pater doing the right thing." Georgina was at home of course, but I had our daughter Rosie with me sitting on my shoulders and she smiled to see her grandfather. He smiled and hurried us into a coffee shop.

He retired when he was sixty-five and followed my mother from room to room, asking "What's that you're cooking?", watching her dust, peering out the window until she returned from shopping. "Do you know," my mother once said, "I was having a wee this morning and he came in while I was there and said 'I just wondered where you were!'" After Georgina left me I liked to visit him. "Dad," I would say, "would you like a round of golf?" and I would wait while he went out the room saying "I'll just see what your mother wants me to wear."

He often wore the corduroy coat when we played golf. Many of its honey-coloured ridges had worn away, and his rimless glasses had a chipped lens and did not rest straight anymore. I don't know how he was able to see through such a cockeyed thing. Long, unfashionable sideburns seemed to pull the flesh

down from his skull and gather it into stubby jowls that bunched over his collar when he turned his head to gaze at a girl.

I have recurring baldness dreams. My hair is actually thick and in the mode but I dream about running my hand over my dome, and a faceless woman mumbles something which I think is slighting, and mirrors dog my days with close-ups. I feel uneasy after these dreams, convinced that something has been removed from me in the night. I told Lisa this one morning when she woke me up. She is quite young and yet she wants to come and live with me and does not seem to notice my age. She tells me not to be silly. But I used to joke with everybody, "If I get like my old man when I'm his age just put a bullet in me, will you?"

We buried him this morning. Georgina was there, looking very upset, and she came in the car with my mother and the children. She sat close to me in the front seat and I had a feeling of past family occasions as my arm brushed against her arm when I turned on the headlights and changed gears.

A hushed, fervent man came down the steps of the undertaker's building, clasping his hands and bending towards us. He opened the car door and fussed around us, and then a profound young man took us to the tiny chapel. It had plaster things tipped with gold paint, and a thick carpet and weak piped music defeating the scrape of the women's stockings and my best shoes protesting. We looked down at my father. He was even smaller than he had looked in hospital last week. His pinched, chalky face and patrician nose emerged out of the white silk, and the deep abundant colours of the silver handles, wood casket and fabrics drained him of colour. "Poor old fellow," said my mother. "Poor old fellow".

Afterwards my daughter Rosie gave me a sad hug and said she would come and see me later today. Her boyfriend walked out on her a few months ago not long after the baby was born and she likes to visit me a couple of times a week. I am perplexed by matters of time and the stages at which one achieves things when I see her and the baby because she is twenty-four years old, teaching a senior class, and buying her own house. I find it difficult to accommodate this but it's true, she is. And the thought of Rosie in her own house and Rosie having children getting older and thinking me a tiresome grandfather leaves me feeling that time and progress are things that happen to other people. After all, my face in the mirror hasn't changed.

It is all happenchance. From now on my response is going to be "I'll believe it when I see it" to any statement made to me: Lisa clasping my shoulders saying "Things'll get better,

you'll see. Time's a great healer"; Rosie saying in fact she feels much freer now; mechanics under the bonnet of my car; Georgina listening consideringly to me and saying "Point taken, point taken."

**Paul Knobel**

## **IN THE NEW FLAT**

*to Gillian Moriarty*

On a pink sofa a splash of cushion.

You've arranged things as you want them:

a basket of vegetables;

a silver tea set;

a dilly bag, a gourd.

An acrobatic Kertesz photograph.

You've composed yourself like a painting,

a woman staring at a goldfish;

like a very contented cat

that purrs with no need of stroking.