

Robyn Mathison

TRAINED AT THE CONSERVATORIUM

Auntie Ida was helping Mum lay out the tea things on the cane table on the side verandah.

“I had no idea she sang so well.”

I crouched beside the violet bed below the verandah rail. This was a good place to listen without being seen. We had just come back from the school concert, where I’d sung the solo, ‘Oh for the wings of a dove’.

Whenever I was practising it, Mum would say, “Your Uncle Billy used to sing that, when he was a choirboy.”

You could tell from the way she said it that it was the best thing Uncle Billy had ever done before he ran away to sea when he was fifteen.

“You really should have her voice trained, Thea.”

I remember Uncle Jack on the farm last summer, with his kelpie and her two pups.

“Back! Back!” he’d shout and give short, sharp whistles. “Git on back!”

This means the dogs should come around behind the sheep. I like it best when she’s driving them and she runs along on their backs to get in front off strays.

“But who is there in this town to give her lessons?” Mum said. “There’s no-one at the convent.”

“There’s Mrs Willis,” Auntie Ida said.

Mrs Willis? She comes to our house when the Hospital Auxiliary has card afternoons. I can’t imagine her singing. She’s short and stoutish and always dresses in navy blue. She’s got tiny feet on the end of matchstick legs. I think only the bits below her skirt are skinny: the rest of her looks very wide. She looks a bit like one of Mum’s Black Australorps.

Auntie Ida has Rhode Island Reds. She and Mum both say that White Leghorns are too flighty and not necessarily the best layers. They like brown eggs best. G-Ma likes Light Sussex hens, which you don’t see much nowadays. They only lay white eggs, too, but the right Sussex Cross will lay brown.

G-Ma's another one you can't imagine singing, but she does. I've heard her, in St Thomas's. Her voice comes loud and soft, with no particular significance – because she's deaf, Mum says. G-Ma knows the words of every hymn. She only holds the book open in case the person next to her can't find the place. Her chin wobbles when she sings.

Mrs Willis has what G-Ma calls a bosom. I imagine it would rise and fall when she sings, the way it does when she bids at cards.

"I didn't know she sang," Mum was saying.

"Oh, yes. She trained at the Conservatorium in Melbourne."

That's funny. I've been there – well to the one in Hobart, when we were on holiday. Twice we went there and I didn't hear anyone singing. Perhaps it happened after the gates were shut.

I decided to ask Mum about this and went up on to the verandah, but before I could get a word in, she spoke to me.

"Ah, there you are, Dear. Run along and get your grandmother, there's a good girl. Tell her the tea's ready to pour. I think she's in the blue bed."

That's G-Ma's special garden, round the back past the grape vine trellis. It's all blue flowers: Ageratum, Love-in-the-Mist, Delphiniums, pale and dark-blue Pansies, with Baby-Blue-Eyes and Lobelias round the edges. Forget-Me-Nots come up there on their own every year, like the Linarias that we call Hen-and-Chickens and some people call Eggs-and-Bacon. They're not all blue.

G-Ma was there, down on her haunches, weeding. By the time she had taken off the gardening gloves and washed her hands and we got back to the verandah, Mum and Auntie Ida were talking about Peggy Naismith's wedding. They gave me a scone and a piece of cake and told me to run along.

It was after the holidays before the subject of singing came up again. I had already been learning the piano for two years, at the convent, but what I really wanted was to learn tap-dancing and ballet; in the Hall after school on Wednesdays.

I want silver tap shoes that go clackety-clack even when you're just walking. You can use white ones and paint them with Silvasfos. You get the taps at the shoe counter at Richards'; but we'd have to write away for the pink toe shoes with satin ribbons.

I asked Mum if I could learn dancing.

"I don't think so, Dear; not with your weak chest. But I'll ask Dr Wayne."

G-Ma didn't think tap-dancing was suitable, which meant she thought it was common. But Mum did go to see Dr Wayne.

"Dr Wayne thinks dancing is a bit strenuous for you, Dear, and the dust would be very irritating. But he thinks the singing is a good idea. All that breathing will be good for your chest."

I wonder if I'll end up with a bosom.

"Mrs Willis is very pleased to take you on as a pupil. I called there this afternoon. I've spoken to Uncle Roger and he can pick you up after school on Wednesday and take you for your first lesson."

Mrs Willis and I are in that strange building that's like a church. The air is thick and warm and steamy. We're standing together by that pond, in clouds of Primulas and Cinerarias, all pink and white and purple. Our voices rise to the roof of white-washed glass. The Gardens are closed and with lifting bosom and quivering chin we're singing,

"Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove."

On Wednesday afternoon Uncle Roger walked with me to Mrs Willis's house. He said he'd be back to get me at half-past four.

We had the singing lesson in her dim front room that smells of varnish and floor polish. Light from the sun came in through the brown holland blinds. I stood on an autumn-toned mat by the piano while Mrs Willis explained about the diaphragm, which on her is between the waist and the bosom.

We did breathing and scales.