COMING OF AGE
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When I was a small girl, I used to hang from trees by my legs and watch from under my skirts my parents rowing in the distance.

They brawled in cemeteries and parks around Brisbane mainly, but I recall some terrible times in the Fitzroy Gardens and Wattle Park, Melbourne, a lift in the Hotel Australia, the Corso at Manly, Mt. Cootha Kiosk and a long rutted road going out towards Tewantin. In fact, looking back, they seemed to have spats all along the eastern seaboard.

The skirt that comes clearly to mind was of pleated navy serge and with it I wore a red jumper ("Red's your colour, Margaret!") with two dogs or ducks or flower-pots - something suitable - on the front and I had a fringe and freckles and a sad waif-like face. Now why red, I ask myself. Why? I hid behind the fringe, too, but mainly you could see me any Saturday afternoon from the age of seven on, peering at them, head downwards, from behind my pleats.

One place we visited a lot was Newstead Park where an old cannon had been embedded in cement and pointed down Hamilton Reach at the freighters. When I wasn't dangling, I sat astride this and skidded down it till the loading breach or whatever it was nudged me. About half a mile farther along
the river from the Breakfast Creek mouth was another triangle of grass with two guns; and I still have a yellowed assortment of photographs with me standing triumphantly on one having just sunk the Oronsay. Just after or before a row. I'm not sure. I was smiling, but that's no indication, because I learnt early to smile anyway so that outsiders wouldn't know what was going on. The main places I recall are those - Toowong Cemetery, the slopes of Mt. Cootha and Newstead. "We're going to the guns today," the adult world would say. I didn't realise then how suitable it all was.

Newstead Park had cotton palms, regularly shaped flower-beds of zinnias and gerberas, a bandstand and old men playing draughts on concrete draught-boards, with long hooked poles that they used to haul the dinner-plate men around. When I was ten the cotton palms drooped straight to the ground and I would hide in them and feel safe. Or jump in the bandstand and feel safe. Of course all you psychiatric symbolists would describe that as a pretty obvious getting-back-to-the-womb complex, but we all know now it wasn't that.

We enjoyed the cemeteries too. I think they must have been depression era entertainment, cheap and instructive. Or maybe my mother had a fanatical wish to impress on us the evanescence of things temporal. I had a completely balanced attitude to graveyards on those hot summer afternoons as I leapt from slab to slab. Sometimes I'd pause and read aloud life histories that were frighteningly long or brief, but the temporary condition in which my thin, agile, smallgirl body jumped and hopped was moved only by the eternal charm of well-tended lawn and concrete angels with adorable smiles.

There was one dreadful Sunday in the winter, I remember. We had been given a big kite. It was called a Sky Raider and came complete with a compact mile-long ball of pink twine. All week we had been longing to fly it, pestering for an outing, and at the week-end we went to the football oval near the
cemetery, praying for high winds. We were all joy, all expectation. But during the ham sandwiches and the thermos tea and the cold scones it began again, and there she was with her mouth turned to trap him and the day gone wrong and he shouting. "Don't take God's name in vain," she would say, driving him. And off he'd stalk.

"Come on, baby," he would plead to me. And I wouldn't know what to do, for it was imperative to placate the one, while my whole heart cried out to being friends with the other. So I would sit hunched on the seat, desperate to go with him, and kicking at the turf edge. Thump. Thump. "Don't wear out your shoes like that." Thump. "Do what you're told. You're his daughter, all right." And I would watch two hundred yards off my sister and father trailing miserably across the oval until he ran suddenly and the wind, God bless and bless and bless, I could see through my latched fingers was taking and hurtling and he was running with it as it bounded and beaked at clouds like a hawk.

We took turns to hold the string, chasing each other, our mouths open, gasping and beginning to smile again. We flapped like a trio of crazed birds over the turf with the tugging life at the end of the string so animated against cloud masses with its deep-pink as we watched it grow smaller and stamp-sized; and for half an hour it was the best day of all. The row faded, although the faces, the adult ones, remained guarded. Later, two horses put to grass came thudding, goaded by louts near the gents, and pounded past our picnic papers into the scrubby tree fringe, kicking wildly and swerving around us. That was the first time I was ever really afraid. Rows and slamming doors, raised voices, locked straining bodies, these had been the substance of my fears for years. But this external terror brought about a truce between them in their anxiety for us so that we went home together, speaking, all of us.
This is all pretty muddled. Sometimes you look at those anatomical diagrams of brains and it's for all the world like spaghetti and that's how these memories are - slippery, not altogether pleasant, and entangled as well.

But it was a winter Sunday at Newstead that I set out to write about. I was wearing my navy serge skirt and a brown jumper. I had brown shoes and beige socks with a ribbing pattern I admired as fancy and navy school panties. And my parents sat side by side because they were married on a harder than marriage bench that looked down the point towards the guns and pontoon. Over near the Creek half a dozen old men brooded above the concrete draught-field. (Never talk to old men, they warned me as a little girl, all little girls. Never never never. I was terrified of those doddering absorbed old pets who would not have noticed my skipping feet. But they warned. And warned. Perhaps that is why I have been keen on them ever since.)

Small craft beetled about and a big boy in short pants slipped on the lower part of the ramp and skidded along the green slime. There was a lot going on. Mother and father fought quietly in deadly acid tones that never went beyond the small area of bench. I suppose it is a gift to be able to fight without raising your voice but it is a talent I neither have nor want. My sister stumped off sulking and threw bread into the river. Gulls wobbled and swooped. I went away from the persistence, persistence, and found my favourite young tree and hung for a while by my legs, absorbing the upside down landscape. Then I hauled myself up and vanished into the green and peered through leaves at them glowing with reprisals fifty feet away. Their faces were soured with stale words, accusations, denials. My mother, at the height of her sotto voce passion, still looked every inch a lady. My father looked desperate to escape. Any minute now he would shout at her and the domesticity would burst and the shattered bits of rubber would come down and suffocate.
I heard him and drew back into the quivering leaves. Please, I prayed to something bearded who lived for ever behind cloud storm, please.

My mother's face was tight as if each ear had been screwed like a violin peg. My father sucked hopelessly at his cold pipe and his hand trembled. I could see. I dropped to a lower branch to divert myself, them, anything. I swung by my legs, somersaulted through my arms, showed off with my limbs performing fantastic, diversionary tactics. I could sense them watching me through their words.


I pretended to be deaf but she insisted. She always won. I wondered what could be the matter. In front of them both my blood paused at the something in her tone that was already making me feel guilty.

"You'll have to stop swinging like that from trees," she said. "You're getting too big." She glanced meaningly at the old men. My father, dying inwardly, looked away and sucked terribly at the little smoking stem. I was twelve. I saw suddenly my blue pants, my slim thighs waving whitely in the air, my skirt flapping idiotically over my head. I knew at once what she meant and I wanted to die with shame even while she destroyed my innocence.

I never climbed trees in parks after that. Things were never the same again.