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The Happiest Music on Earth

THREE STORIES

Sue Wootton

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..... Sue Wootton .....

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Sue writes: I gratefully acknowledge the University of Otago's Robert Burns Fellowship which I held in 2008. The writing time that I was gifted then, along with the working practice that I honed that year, bears fruit in this collection.

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The Happiest Music on Earth

My father told me this story, so it's as true as he could make it. He said that when he was a boy he wanted more than anything else in the whole entire universe to ride a roller coaster. There were no roller coasters in the small provincial city where he grew up, not even when the A&P Show was on at the showgrounds. There was a Ferris wheel, though, and Dad used to see exactly half of it on A&P weekends as he walked past the racecourse along Showground Road. He could see the top half of the Ferris wheel as it loomed above the tall boundary fence. Sometimes it was cranking around, and the people in each dangling chair looked impossibly high. The contraption, even to my father Earle's young eyes, seemed too rickety to be safe.

Earle was nine when this happened. Or was he eleven? Like I say, Dad told me this story so you have to doubt. He was walking home from the dairy this one Saturday afternoon with a loaf of bread and a tuppenny lolly mixture. He was not hurrying. Earle was never in a hurry to get home. His father, my grandfather, whose name was Lloyd, was a policeman. Off duty, he drank. On duty, he waded into situations and blew them up. He was like an arsonist in that he regarded loitering youths or thieving good-for-nothings as so much inflammable timber. First he'd ignite something with a touch of abuse, and then he'd set about pretending to put out the fire by whacking his truncheon all over it. He was keen with the truncheon. Earle

was scared of Lloyd, and I was scared of him too, when it came my time to be born and handed across, granddaughter to grandfather, for assessment. I feel I remember being held by him, the sensation that he already didn't like my disobedience and was letting me know, through his uncupped palms, that he could drop me any time he wanted. Or maybe Earle told me this about himself as a baby, being held by Lloyd. It must have happened to one of us, I think. And so, in a way, it must have happened to us both.

But, my father … he was nine, he says, and Lloyd had sent him to the dairy for a loaf of bread. The A&P Show was in town, and he was dawdling home along Showground Road, half-watching the top half of the fitfully rolling Ferris wheel, tipping sherbet from a bag and letting it slow-fizz on his tongue. All of a sudden a car drew up alongside. To begin with, Earle didn't even notice. Then someone called from the driver's seat: Hey, you Lloyd Goodman's son? Hop in. Your father gave me tickets to take you to the show.

My father said that even though he wanted more than anything in the universe at that time to ride a roller coaster, and even though the Ferris wheel was the next best thing and all that was ever going to be available in that tin-arse town – even though all that, he was still Lloyd's son, and he knew evil intent when he heard it. He went closer, right up to the car door.

Come on, sonny, said the man. Here, see? I got tickets for us. Your dad gave them to me. Said you deserved a treat. You're a good boy, Lloyd told me to tell you.

Earle stood close and watched and listened. The man was scrawny and nicotine-stained. He was missing a front tooth. He was wearing a black fisherman's rib jersey. (Not that Earle knew the term; he just memorised what the man was wearing. It was his father, later, who told him it was 'fisherman's rib'. A details man, was Lloyd.) The stranger was getting impatient. Come on, kid, he said, but the nice voice was turning hard. In you get. He held some tickets over the passenger seat towards the open

window. Here – see? Tickets. He flapped them at Earle. Earle leaned closer, squinted.

'They weren't bloody A&P Show tickets,' my father wheezed at me, telling this story (all these years later). He said he could see they were old movie tickets from the Embassy. He said he got wild then.

Earle could move like a whippet when he was a kid. An advantage (perhaps the only one) of being Lloyd's boy. Had to know how to duck and dive and sprint when necessary. Now he stabbed out his arm and snatched the tickets right out of the driver's fist. Swift as a cobra (my father said). You little shit! breathed the man, but Earle barely heard him – he was gone, piston-legging it up Showground Road, tickets scrunched in his fist, loaf of bread crushed to his side. He paused, panting, at the corner of his own street, to check he wasn't being followed. He wasn't. Even so, he took the long-cut through the overgrown end of the next-door neighbour's property. He almost climbed the tree there, the one he used as a refuge when Lloyd was rampaging. But then he remembered that Lloyd was waiting for the bread. It would be wise to go home. He touched the trunk of the tree though, in the usual place. There was a patch where Earle had pulled away the rough bark to expose the smoothness beneath. He had a ritual of putting his hand flat to this patch. It made him feel lucky, he said, and then, very quietly, he told me that he always made a wish when he did it and that it was always the same wish. He never said what it was.

So this particular day he paused and placed his hand on the patch. Then – zoom – a hasty clamber, a vault over the fence between the properties, and he was home. Lloyd was waiting at the kitchen table, his fist curled around a tea mug. Earle sniffed the air, knew it wasn't tea in the mug, and got ready to run again if necessary. Lloyd had worked late shift the night before and it had been a fine night's work. *I cleaned up,* he'd told Earle in the morning. *Cleaned up this cesspool town.*

Now Lloyd raised suspicious eyes. What took you so long? What's that? He'd seen the tickets. Earle handed them over. These are bloody

useless, scoffed Lloyd. Get yourself arrested if you try and use these again, boy. And believe me (he grunted), you don't want to get yourself arrested if you can help it.

This man, said Earle timidly, this man stopped his car and said you'd told him to take me to the A&P Show. He said you'd given him tickets. But these were the tickets. I knew they weren't real. I knew it. I ran away.

Lloyd got interested then. What man, what car? What did he look like? How about that jersey? Tell me again. Fisherman's rib! Smoker, you reckon? Skinny. Lloyd leaned forward in his chair to study Earle's every answer as it came out of his mouth. Earle had never felt so important. He was careful to do his best to tell the truth. He felt something in his mouth with every word – a weight, the weight, he thought, of accuracy. His tongue laboured. His jaw ached. When the interrogation was over he was exhausted.

Lloyd cracked his big red knuckles and got to his feet. He picked up the mug, gulped from it and replaced it with a thud on the table. Earle went rabbity. That's how he saw himself, like a rabbit in a paddock, coiled down hard but never so alert as at this moment – ready to spring at the merest *click* of an invisible safety catch. Lloyd reached into his pocket and pulled out a few coins. He laid them one by one on the table, with five hard snaps. Five pennies. Buy yourself a few more lollies if you want, said Lloyd. You've done well. I'm going out for a while. You stay out of trouble. I'll be back about tea time. Peel the spuds.

Earle's rabbity self experienced a rush of relief. His suddenly uncoiled haunches went trembly. Lloyd was going out. A whole afternoon without Lloyd. He kept his eyes down and said, Yes, Dad … okay, Dad, and watched in his peripheral vision as Lloyd pulled on the steel-capped boots he used for search and rescue work and packed an old towel and his truncheon into a zippered sports bag. His truncheon. Earle went rabbity again. Lloyd picked up his car keys, and turned to face Earle. I'm going

fishing, he said, staring Earle right in the eyes. Got that? Anyone asks, I'm down the river, but you don't know exactly where. All right?

Earle replied in the rabbity voice he most hated to use: Yes, Dad. Fishing. Okay, I've got that. Have a good time.

Lloyd guffawed. Oh I will, son, I will. Gonna catch a big fish today, boyo.

Earle watched from the kitchen window the Holden heading out of the driveway. Lloyd turned right, towards Showground Road. The river was to the left. Earle pulled some hunks off the bread (it was a Vienna, white, unsliced), and then cut two pieces properly with the bread knife. He spread them with Vegemite and stuffed both in his mouth at the same time, hoping that it would stop him doing what he was going to do next.

His feet paid no attention to the plug in his mouth. They moved him out of the kitchen into the corridor, from which other rooms opened: bathroom left, spare bedroom right, his bedroom opposite Lloyd's at the far end. There was a photograph of Earle's mother, my grandmother, on the hall table next to the phone. The silver-plated frame was unstable and often fell. Earle hated hearing it topple as he hot-footed it up the corridor to hide in his bedroom. He always felt it was his fault, and that he'd failed her, even though sometimes he knew it was actually Lloyd who made her fall, stomping behind him and shouting so brutally that the walls and floorboards shook. She wore a crack across her face, from forehead to cheekbone, like a stinging slap. Earle sensed that he himself had inflicted it upon her.

Right now she was upright enough, smiling at him. The picture had been taken at a fairground. She was far too old for a merry-go-round, but nevertheless she was riding a painted horse, and had both arms wrapped around a candy-striped pole. Her horse was up; the horse ahead was down. Both horses pursued an exuberant fountain of cockerel tail feathers that was disappearing out of shot. A white swan-seat, empty, was in the foreground. Earle's mother was wearing a twin-set and a swirling skirt. Her hair was

wavy, cut quite short, and she looked happy. Perhaps she liked the photographer; the cheekiness of her grin suggested so. The merry-go-round was old-fashioned and solid, gracefully constructed and beautifully painted. The horses had large friendly dark eyes, real leather bridles with real silvery bells, and manes so glossy Earle always wanted to stroke them. A sign on the swan in antique handwriting announced:

ROLL UP! ROLL UP!
RIDE THE STEAMDRIVEN GALLOPING HORSES
AND RACING COCKERELS
FLOAT DOWN THE RIVER WITH THE SWIMMING SWANS
HEAR THE ORIGINAL 89 KEY GAVIOLI ORGAN PLAY
THE HAPPIEST MUSIC ON EARTH
PRESENTED FOR YOUR PLEASURE
BY THE AMAZING BRAVADO BROTHERS

Gingerly, Earle picked up his mother. Sometimes the prop at the back fell off and it would take him many nervous, fumbling moments to reattach it. His mouth still crammed with bread, he held the photograph and slid down the wall until he was sitting with his legs stuck out into the middle of the corridor. He put his mother on his knees and stared.

For Earle the photograph was more like a film than a static image. If he looked long enough, the merry-go-round began to turn, and he imagined he could hear giggles as the horses rose and fell. In his mind he was sitting in the swan, next to his mother on her horse, and the two of them went gently round and round, side by side, catching each other’s eyes from time to time and laughing out loud.

In spite of himself, Earle chewed the bread and swallowed it. Now his mouth was empty. He gazed at the photo, and the merry-go-round

continued its slow circling. Soon the music started. At first it was thin and elusive, patchy, hard to pin down or hold onto, but the longer Earle sat in the swan the clearer it became. Single notes became short runs of notes, stretched into melodies, tentative and truncated, then into waves of merriment that became, after several loops of the merry-go-round, great gushes of joy. The music soared, an aria of happiness. Earle felt it pull: on him, on his mother, on her horse, on the folded wings of the painted swan. There was never choice at this point. At first in whispers, and then with his mouth wide open and the notes coming from deep down in his lungs, coming out pure and true, Earle began to sing.

Earle hated to do this. He hated it because he was always so lost, not while the singing was happening, but when the singing stopped. When the singing stopped he never knew exactly what had taken hold of him, moved through him, and vanished. He retained an aftertaste of incredible contentment, but the actual contentment, the joy, the bliss – those had gone. All gone.

Earle said that on this particular day, perhaps knowing that Lloyd would be away all afternoon, he must have sung for an hour or more. He said it was like being in a trance, like floating in a place with no sharp edges, like existing inside the music. He said that if Lloyd ever heard him sing, if by accident Earle in his perfect boy soprano voice let loose a line of melody, then Lloyd called him a complete girl's blouse, a woolly woofter, a bloody poof. Earle said it all ended later anyway, when Lloyd whacked him so hard across the ear that it broke his eardrum. Earle said he never sang after that; the music wouldn't come to him. Earle said he could have been an opera singer otherwise. Like one of those fat Italian tenors, and really rich. Said Earle, said my father in his old man hospital-issue pyjamas, so you have to doubt.

But this day was before that day. On this day Earle sang for an hour, then came to sitting on the hall floor with the photograph of his mother on his lap and that aftertaste of rapture. He registered the threadbare carpet and

the chipped skirtings. Somehow sullied, ashamed, he reached up and placed the photo back on the hall table, careful to position the prop so it didn't collapse. He rolled onto his knees and pushed himself up using the wall for support, like someone aged. He went to the loo and had a long pee. He remembered to wash his hands. Then he went back to the kitchen, and was especially careful when passing the hall table to walk softly, so as not to cause the floorboards to vibrate.

In the kitchen he picked up the coins that Lloyd had left on the table. He didn't exactly want to go to the shop again. He wasn't sure how brave he felt, really, about walking along Showground Road after what had happened in the morning. He wasn't exactly hungry either, but he needed to stop his mouth again, quickly. And the longer he hung round the house with Lloyd away, and only half a loaf of bread to eat, the greater the risk that he would … do it again. Very fast, without thinking, he dropped the coins in his pocket and walked out the door. Earle said he didn't know until he was at the corner of his street and Showground Road that he wasn't going to the dairy. It was at the corner that he looked down and found two more pennies in the gutter. People were drifting out of the showground gates; it was past three and there was no queue to get in. The sign said, Admission: Child 6d. Yes! He just walked straight up to the booth and handed over the money. The turnstile clicked, and he was in.

'Bloody brilliant,' said Earle (when he was telling me this yesterday). I wiped some dribbled tea off his chin with a tissue. At least it was definitely tea and not whisky. 'What was bloody brilliant, Dad?' I asked.

'That A and P Show,' said Earle, coughing wetly. 'All those animals. What a stink! I spent ages leaning over the pens trying to work out why this sheep and not that sheep got the rosette, you know? And heaps of people too, everyone smiling and eating – place was filthy, animal poop, cigarette butts, dropped food everywhere. Candy-floss, chips, ice creams. Kept standing in stuff. But the loud speakers, and the rifle shooting range and the

ping-pong clowns, and there was a chocolate wheel … I thought it was magic. Magic.'

Earle went quiet then, but I was used to this. Though on this occasion I think he could remember, he just wasn't saying.

The thing is, for Earle, nine-year old Earle (if he was nine), it was like walking into the photograph, and although he should have expected that, he had not expected it. So really he was half-pie waiting to come upon the merry-go-round, and even maybe quarter-pie anticipating that his mother would be grinning at him from her horse. And even though that was a pretty ridiculous thought, it was a nice thought, because Earle hadn't seen her since he was two, and of course he was too young to know at the time that he should collect the very essence of her before she died, and file it away in a locked part of his memory. Or perhaps he wasn't too young to know that – perhaps he was just too young to know that he mustn't ever, ever, lose the key.

Yesterday, at the hospital, I asked Earle if he found a merry-go-round at the A&P Show. My father shook his head, with more vehemence than its usual Korsakoff's tremor, and his eyes grew watery. I felt, I definitely felt, I had gone too far. 'Doesn't matter, Dad,' I said, touching his pyjama sleeve. I looked at the back of his hand, where the cannula entered one of the knobbly veins. The rehydration solution was trickling in. Not very well hidden in the folds of his pyjama pants, a uridome was collecting what was trickling out. The bag was half full of very yellow urine, and lay on the floor between us.

'No, sweetheart,' he said. 'It does matter. I've not been a good father to you. Too late now. But.'

Sweetheart. I tasted that word for a while. Unusual. Nice.

Young Earle explored the A&P Showgrounds in a state of wonderment, with a kind of hopeful excitement fizzing within him like the sherbet he'd been tasting in the morning. At last he found the merry-go-round. Or what passed for a merry-go-round. At first he thought there must be another

merry-go-round – a real one. But this was it. It was small. It was made of metal and cold to touch. The poles were thin, the horses gaunt. It was shabby and unkempt. Rust was eating at the joints. The paint was dull and flaking. A shifty-faced youth scowled at Earle. Five years and under only, sissy-boy. Earle took his hand off the horse's flank as if he'd been stung. He didn't want a ride anyway. Not on this stupid tin-can roundabout. The youth took some coins off a couple of little kids, whose parents helped them choose a horse to ride. The kids seemed frightened. They clung to the horses' sharp-looking necks and cast anxious glances at the adults. The operator slouched to the switch. The horses started up with a jerk. The merry-go-round picked up speed until centrifugal force had the horses tenting outwards. The children rode rigidly, small hands pressed against thin manes with nothing to clutch, feet straining for toeholds in the too-long stirrups. A scratchy tune played from the weak speakers. A plodding melody: dutiful. Something a reluctant learner might produce under threat. Tinkety-tinkety-tink.

Earle turned and ran. Not so much rabbity now – more like a hare, direct and powerful. It was the gate he was heading for, but it was the fence around the Ferris wheel he came up against. He stopped short, panting. There was a girl selling tickets. Best view in town and only a penny, she told him, chewing gum and watching him from under bright blue eyelids. Step right up, sir, she said, winking at him. You got the money, honey, I got the time.

He reached into his pocket for his remaining coin. She was holding the gate open to the last empty car on the ride. Come on, sweetie pie, she said. Don't be shy. The people in the other cars laughed. He handed her the penny. In you get, darling, she said. Just don't be sick.

He bolted. Hare-like, rabbit-like – Earle-like. The way he would be all his life. He bolted towards home but at the last moment diverted through the neighbours' garden. He touched the secret place on the tree. He climbed up and hugged the branch until his heart stopped banging quite so hard.

Eventually he came down and climbed over the fence. He went into the kitchen and found the spuds. He'd just started peeling them when he heard the Holden pull up in the driveway.

Lloyd came in, very happy. Leave those, he said to Earle. I bought us fish and chips. Caught a big one today, boy, thanks to you. Got the chippie to cook it up for us. Gotta say, it put up quite a fight.

'It might have been a joke,' said Earle, in hospital, his head shaking, as it usually does these days. His hands shaking too, the plastic tubing doing a shimmy all the way from the back of his wrist to the drip bag on the aluminium frame. 'I mean, the way he laughed.'

Lloyd dropped the newspaper parcel on the table where it steamed gently. Pour us a beer, mate, he said, kicking off his boots. Earle looked at them, very quick. Stole a glance, you might say, from right under Lloyd's nose.

'Wasn't any river mud on those boots,' Earle whispered. His wrecked face with its creases and scars and sunspots – it was like I saw it for the first time. The yellowed whites of his eyes, the rims around the iris. Water, a couple of tears, if you could trust them, pooling on the lower ridge of each eyelid. I put my hand on my father's old shaking one. His skin was cool, slack. I felt my own arm start to jig.

Lloyd's sports bag sat where he'd dropped it on the threshold, and Earle had to step across it to get to the beer fridge on the porch. There was no river mud on the sports bag either. Earle sensed Lloyd's truncheon, lead-heavy in the zipped-up dark. He feared to wake it. He didn't want to see what was splattered on it, but in his mind's eye he saw it anyway, and in his mind's ear he heard Lloyd laughing uproariously and calling it river mud.

Earle held his breath and stepped with great care over the bag. He walked as gently as possible to the fridge. No judders. He could not let the slightest tremble loose into the floorboards, for fear the vibration would travel via the underfloor joists to the corridor, where it would rise via the

hall table legs to the place where his mother was presently riding upright on a beautiful horse, listening to the happiest music on earth.

Icy Noctiluca

‘I unhem creation a little, to work out the stitch.’ Vincent O’Sullivan

Hamburg, 1669 – the alchemist Hennig Brandt discovers phosphorus from urine.

I dreaded winter but had more to fear from spring. A single night inhaling the scent of meadow flowers through the open casement, and my maid might rise at dawn, hitch up her skirts and flee. I had already lost two maids to those sweet zephyrs. Closed shutters would keep the breezes at bay, but I was obliged to keep the casement open, even in deepest winter. There was no other way to live with Hennig’s vats of stinking hell, whose odiferous fumes choked my days and nights and sent all callers reeling from our doors. I had wedded my fortune to Hennig’s, and thus to his vile cauldrons. By day I pounded herbs, seeking to alleviate the stench that emanated from his labours by reproducing in my mortar those wafting spring perfumes: a bouquet to prettify the air we breathed, that we might not be asphyxiated simply because for warmth we closed the shutters. By night I lay sleepless, freezing. I am Margaretha, wife of Hennig Brandt the alchemist. This is my tale. Hold the page at arms’ length. Breathe the foul air which rises from it.

After the second of my maids fled, I lived with only Hennig for company, and that was as good as solitude for all the wit of his

conversation. ‘The gold is in the urine, Margaretha,’ was the limit of his opinion on any matter. One day the magistrate, his hand clamped to his nose, dropped the orphan Hilda at my doorstep and scurried away. Hilda spilt more gruel than both my previous maids put together. Water sloshed from the bucket at her clumsy kick; she idled and dreamed as she polished a coin of brightness into the otherwise perpetually dull copper kettle. But Hilda, I soon learned, had other talents. And so I supplied her with kerchief after kerchief freshly infused with blends of thyme, rosemary, cloves and lavender. She tucked them in her bodice. As she blundered through her duties, she at least possessed the grace of fragrance. Alas, Hennig’s reek was always stronger. Fearing to lose Hilda, I pounded my pestle with renewed vigour. Hilda! Hot Hilda!

My previous maids had lain lukewarm on my mattress, giving no more than tepid respite when I climbed alongside. I was glad to send them to the attic pallet, and to curl, arms around knees, head beneath the covers, banking my own meagre warmth for the long night ahead. Unaccustomed to the stink of my household, Hilda had spent much of her first day in violent purge. I sent her to my mattress early to allow her to recover. When later I slid into bed beside her, it was as a loaf sliding into the oven. Her heat! I did not send her to the attic, not that night or ever since. Snore she did, and poke me with her elbows, and cry out in her dreams, but throughout, she glowed like fire in the grate. For this I more than willingly forwent intact crockery, shiny copper and well swept floorboards.

The year progressed. Upstairs, I pounded herbs with my pestle and mortar. Downstairs, Hennig boiled piss. It was through the floorboards that the terrible smell seeped, although I had caulked the gaps with beeswax, so that even without Hilda throwing oatmeal to the boards our floor was tacky to the step.

Hennig boiled and distilled, boiled and distilled. Defeated and re-defeated, he only set his jaw and insisted, ‘The gold is in the urine.’ I had once shared Hennig’s conviction that urine, being gold in colour, must be

gold in essence. But the stench had convinced me otherwise. The perfume of fresh piss is not entirely disagreeable. But the urine in Hennig's huge storage vats almost squirmed with putrefaction. The vapours were overpowering.

One midwinter night Hilda rose from the bed to use the chamber pot. Overheated, as only Hilda could be in such freezing circumstances, she removed the top layer of her petticoats. Suddenly she was a-crackle and ablaze: lightning licked the outline of her body blue-white and fierce, then was gone. She climbed back into bed beside me, seemingly unaffected. What witchery had I observed? I crossed myself and drew back from her unnatural warmth. Certainly it was as if Hilda herself had been the source of the light that had flashed around her figure, but Hilda was pious and devout – clumsy, yes, but as a calf is clumsy, never with evil intent. I could not countenance the devil dancing in her. I pondered the phenomenon. The crackling light, I recalled, came as she lifted her skirts over her head. In a flash as bright as that which had enveloped Hilda's body, I thought, 'Phlogiston!' And in another flash I saw Hennig's mistake. What use is gold without fire? It cannot be melded or shaped, and even a king's gold ring at night without candle-flame does not shine. I saw that phlogiston is the true philosopher's stone, and somewhere in Hilda was stored that elemental fire. In her bones? Her blood? Her skin? Even in the excitement of my realisation, I knew I dare not divulge my thoughts to Hennig lest he work his alchemy upon her, bleeding her over a cauldron, boiling her toenails or her teeth in mercury.

I observed. I pondered. Hennig worked night and day in a fervour, believing himself to be on the brink of producing gold. The stench from the cellar intensified as if in league with his mental frenzy. A snowstorm encompassed us, and on the third morning of its grip I woke to a white mound on the foot of the bed. More correctly, a white mound had formed on my side of the foot of the bed, on my feet. The counterpane veiling Hilda's feet was damp where Hilda's heat had melted the windblown snow.

Oh, how my cold toes yearned to apply themselves to the small of her back. But might the injudicious placement of my feet, or too steady a pressure, extinguish her phlogiston? Conversely, might Hilda combust? Nervous now, I kicked her quickly, telling her to rise and blow the kitchen fire to life. Downstairs, as every morning, Hennig would be asleep where he had dropped when exhaustion overtook him, probably face-down on his bench. I hoped he hadn't knocked over his vials. Those spillages were rank and caustic, and the cause of many a scorch mark on the floor. He'd be angry if not woken soon with oatmeal and warm milk, and delivery of the day's first chamber pot.

Hilda climbed out of bed, steaming in the dim dawn light. She crouched to piss, and her piss steamed too. She shuffled from the room, nesting her nose in the crook of her elbow. I crossed myself and rolled into the Hilda-shaped furnace that still smouldered where she had slept, feeling the length of my body immersed in her delicious warmth. Since I knew that as soon as Hilda had coaxed the kitchen hearth to life she would return to collect the chamber pot for Hennig, I reluctantly abandoned the bed for my own morning piss. Quickly, for Hilda's heat would shortly vanish from my mattress, I squatted and supplied Hennig with something more for his cauldrons. The relief of pissing was accompanied by an ache in the region of my heart, a sensation not unlike the thaw of something crisp. I hurried back to Hilda's fading warmth, and curled there. It was sadness for Hennig that I felt, to have worked so arduously for so many years, and in vain. Perhaps, if I could present Hennig with some of Hilda's phlogiston… I lay considering how to capture that fleeting fire. Which part of her, exactly, encased the elemental sparks?

Hilda re-entered the bedchamber, a miserable expression on her face. 'The fire is dead,' she said. She looked longingly at the bed. A flurry of snow blew through the casement. The urine in Hennig's cellar gave up a wave of stench. Hilda gasped; I dived beneath the bedcovers, leaving only my eyes above. On bad days like this I was sure that God Himself, looking

down from His heaven, could distinguish our abode by the miasma of curdled urine in which it was draped. How many times had I prayed for Him to disperse the vapours, without effect? It was as if my prayers were physically prevented from ascending by the counter-pressure of this foul cloud.

Hilda would need to fetch embers from a neighbour. But it could wait. In truth I could not bear to lie alone in my freezing bedchamber, all Hilda's heat vanished as never-been, icicles forming on the sill. A miniature mountain range was building on the foot of the bed. 'Come, Hilda. Let the storm subside a little before you venture out.' I indicated my side of the mattress, that she might melt my snow and re-warm my hollow. My back was to her as she climbed in, but I distinctly heard a crackle. 'Hilda!' I exclaimed. 'Did you spark?'

At first she would not acknowledge my question. I moved to lift the bedclothes from her face, and she clapped her hand on mine to prevent me. 'I confess I sparked. It has always been so, I know not why. But I am no witch!'

'I do not believe in witches or bedevilment.' I crossed myself. 'I believe you have phlogiston within you, Hilda. But where is it? Is it in your hair?' Cautiously I ran a lock of her hair between my thumb and finger.

'It hides in my petticoats. If we retire under the bedclothes, I will demonstrate.'

What a half hour ensued! I held the covers high and we crouched like savages in a dark cave. Transfixed, I watched Hilda whisk her petticoats to loosen their phlogiston, until the crackling sound came again and Hilda was illuminated in a fleeting flash. 'You are not burned?' I gasped.

'It does not burn,' replied Hilda. 'I believe it draws the heat out of me somewhat.' I touched her bosom, and indeed it was cooler than usual. Her breasts were often like two torch flames, very warming to the palm.

I instructed her to remove the petticoats and give them to me. 'Wear my other set, Hilda. Make haste! Herr Brandt is angry at being woken late.'

Our heads free of the bedclothes, we could hear Hennig calling – ‘Margaretha! Margaretha!’ Hilda scrambled out of bed.

‘Deliver the chamber pot to Herr Brandt. Tell him his oats will arrive directly. Bring me a glass vial from his shelves, and my sewing basket. Then run for embers. I shall unhem your petticoats, Hilda, and trap every spark that falls out. We are on the brink of such discoveries!’ Hilda ran to her business, misjudging the proportions of the door and slopping piss from the pot across the threshold. Her feet left melt-prints in the snow on the floorboards. I burrowed in the warm space under the coverlets, and commenced a brisk massage of Hilda’s petticoats. No spark was forthcoming. I held the fabrics to the snowy light of the windy room and allowed the gale to blow through them. The skirts fluttered, but released no spark. I commenced unpicking the seams, caressing the thread for points of heat, seeking to release the phlogiston – that tiny, vital, fiery stitch.

I was thus engaged when Hilda burst in again, practically dancing with excitement. ‘Mistress, you must go to Herr Brandt immediately. You must see!’ Hennig was calling me again, and I detected for the first time a certain excitement in his voice. Could it, was it, had he … ? I threw off the covers, and breathed cautiously of the noxious air. I demanded from Hilda the shawl she had thrown over her shoulders. She had warmed it sufficiently to enable me to embark upon the room without too violent a shivering. ‘My boots,’ I said, and Hilda knelt to button them for me. She was giving off excitement, her hair standing out like a halo, which made me wonder if the phlogiston did in fact inhabit her hair, rather than the grimy undergarments I had been investigating.

‘Come, Mistress!’ Hilda tugged me by the arm most improperly, but Hennig’s voice was calling me on too, and together Hilda and I fair ran down the stairs, bursting with a clatter into Hennig’s cellar. His vats gave off their murderous stench; his cauldrons bubbled and popped. This was normal. Hennig turned towards me with eyes as bright as Hilda’s sparking flashes. He pointed to a bowl of water on the bench. Yet it contained

nothing but a pale waxen bar, which could have been badly-made soap for all the effect it was having on the water. Whatever it was, it was not gold.

'Hold out your hand,' he said. He extracted the soap and placed it in an empty glass bowl. He positioned the bowl on my palm. The substance gleamed; it possessed an inner light – was it alive? Did it breathe? In my fright I dropped it. The glass shattered but the soap glowed on, emitting a smell like garlic. I crossed myself swiftly.

'Margaretha!' I turned. It was as if Hennig held a star, such brilliance radiated from a second bowl balanced on his hand. In the incandescence, his face beamed.

'It does not burn you?' I whispered, seeing the palm of his hand white and aglow as he cupped the strange illumination.

Hennig replied, also in a whisper, 'It is a cold fire. It bears cold light.'

I was seized by a joyful impulse but I could not give it free reign without first confirming my thought. 'Hennig, there will be no further need for urine?'

Hennig shook his head. My joy gathered in me as I divined that urine formed no ingredient of his future alchemy. I too shook my head, gazing in wonderment at the glass bulb. How brim-full it was, of such pure light.

'But yes, we will need urine, Margaretha. We need much more urine, larger vats. The gold is in the light, Margaretha. I must examine the light and discover its properties!' Whoosh! The glass flared again, blindingly.

My lavender-infused kerchief could not completely stifle my sob. I turned, I hitched my skirts. I dashed weeping from Hennig's cellar, up the stairs, across the beeswax floorboards, *critch critch,* out into the snow, and through the streets of Hamburg in the cold wild dawn.

I am Margaretha, wife of Hennig Brandt the alchemist. This is my tale. Smell the page; inhale the foul air in which it is steeped.

Standard Roses

It was a still and chilly day towards the end of July. My husband Stuart had taken our daughter Lily to soccer and I had the house to myself. There were so many possible things to do, and so I made a pot of tea and drank two cups in a row, alone in the silence. That took up quite a bit of time. Finally I rinsed my cup. As I did so, staring absentmindedly out the window, my eyes lit on the roses. Our front path leads straight as a die from the front gate to the front door. It was concreted long ago, perhaps when the villa was new. The path had aged in the same manner as the house, in zig-zag cracks and tilts. When Lily was a toddler the front wheel of her sit-on Snoopy was forever getting stuck at an uneven segment, and I would have to lay my trowel down in the borders and walk across to set it free. A previous owner had planted standard roses either side of the path, and now their roots pressed up like fisted knuckles on the underside of the crumbling cement. But I liked the roses, though I had never put enough time into their care and as a result they were raggedy specimens. Now, from the kitchen window and with the benefit of low winter light, I could suddenly see the more elegant silhouette within each overgrown frame.

Stuart and Lily arrived home ten minutes after I'd made the first cut. I watched as Stuart parked in front of the gate. His jaw was set grim. So Lily's team had lost. Stuart was the coach. He always took it hard. Lily didn't care one way or another, not really, although a win was always a

relief. I felt for her. She got out of the car slowly, casting a sideways glance at Stuart, who remained in the driver's seat, stone-still.

Hi, I called. How did you go? Score any goals?

Lily pushed open the gate and clomped along the path, leaving little sprig-punctured circles of mud and grass in her wake. Something in her face wasn't right. What, honey? What's the matter? The driver's door slammed. Stuart came through the gate, his head down. I saw the donut-centre bald patch at his crown. For god's sake, Stuart, I thought. Give the kid a break.

We didn't play a full game, he said. The ref from the other side collapsed. They couldn't revive him.

Lily walked past me. He died, Mum, she said. Then she climbed the steps to the porch, pulled off her boots, threw them in a clatter to the side, opened the front door and disappeared.

My god, Stuart. That's terrible. What was it, a heart attack? Did you know him?

Ours is not such a big town. I thought we were bound to know him somehow. But we didn't know him. He was just the coach from the other side. Stuart reckoned he'd have been about forty. But he shouldn't have been reffing, he said, he was pretty unfit. I said, the poor little girl, his daughter, and Stuart said, yes, it was terrible. I wondered if I ought to hug him, if he might welcome some comfort. I moved to take off my gardening gloves. An apprehensive look appeared on his face. It's no big deal, he said. Then he continued up the path, kicked off his boots on the porch, and went inside.

Not much later Lily came out. Her hair was wet from the shower. Her fringe flopped over her eyes. Just looking at it made my fingers itch to give it a trim. Physically, everything about her was slightly out of synch: nose too long, as it always was just before a growth spurt; Minnie Mouse feet that seemed to flap as she walked; stick-out knees and elbows. It was no wonder she couldn't kick the ball straight. Stuart could shout all he liked.

There was nothing wrong with her hearing. It was just a long way, at the moment, from her brain to her feet. She gangled her way round the side of the house and wheeled her bike out of the shed. I'm going to Paige's place, she said, clicking her helmet buckle under her chin. She didn't answer my questions: How long will you be? Why don't you bring Paige back here to play? Are you all right? She swung herself onto the bike and pedalled down the path. I stood aside to let her pass. I wasn't too worried. Paige and Lily were best friends, and lived in each other's houses like siblings. Best thing for Lily was probably to have a heart-to-heart with Paige. Paige's mother Stephanie would phone me if there was a problem.

My stack of thorny prunings was growing. I was taking it slowly. I looked at each rose bush for a while before I started. I was trying to see two things: the rose-bush-as-it-was and the rose-bush-as-it-could-be that I had seen from my kitchen window. When I was almost certain I had both images clearly in mind, then, and only then, did I use my secateurs. In that way I worked on. It was a long way from teaching English to Korean students, and the physicality was satisfying. Really I had no clue, but I felt I must be doing something right – there was a sense (I wouldn't be telling Stuart this!) that I was paying a kind of respect to the essence of each bush. I worked slowly but steadily, like Aesop's tortoise, without much noticing time passing, there being no clues in the flat shadowless silver of the day. The job was calming and quieting. I fell into a sedated frame of mind. I had only two rose bushes yet to prune when finally I laid down my secateurs, pulled off my gloves, stretched backwards. Stuart came out on the porch and leaned on the wooden railing. He lit a cigarette.

You're giving up, I said.

He took a deep drag, working up to say something, I could tell. I braced in readiness. Whatever he came out with, it was bound to be cutting. He's a tall, rangy man with hair that was fine, messy and blond – like Lily's now – when we met twenty years ago. When he was a surfie. How astonishing to think of Stuart in his surfie days. Lily would never have believed it if there

weren't photographs to prove it. I suppose it's his temper: you don't tend to think of surfies as having a temper. He *didn't* have a temper back then; what he had was determination, determination to catch the Big One. Maybe that look in his eyes right now was the same old look – determination – and I was wilfully misreading it as anger. Where was the line, anyway, between those two moods? Back then determination had no chance of smouldering unused. No one and nothing ever prevented him getting to the waves. Yes, damn it, I thought, he ought to have got the Principal's job. Years slaving in the DP role – doing Gordon's job for him half the time – Stuart was clearly the frontrunner. It was political correctness gone mad – but the instant I thought that, I rejected it, horrified, hearing Stuart's summing up, not mine at all. *Damn you,* Stuart, for not dealing with it, and actually – don't we both know this really? – Moana was the best candidate for the job. Watching Stuart smoke kind of proved it. He was self-righteously a non-smoker these days, a walking advertisement (as he often smugly announced, eyeing the not-so-strong) for willpower. This wasn't a lie, exactly, not in Stuart's eyes anyway. It was what I'd come to understand as a Stuart truth.

Lily arrived home. She pedalled through the gate and along the path as far as my pile of rose clippings, whereupon she had to dismount and wheel her bicycle carefully around the thorns. How was Paige? I asked. I don't think that Lily heard me at all. She glared at her father smoking on the porch. I thought you'd given up, she said. Where's your chewing gum?

Stuart took another huge, deep draft of smoke and held it in as he stubbed the butt angrily on the railing. He threw the remains on the grass. Jee-zus! is all he said, the word in spite of himself almost holy, a sound of awe in a cloud of lung-warm smoke. Lily stalked off round the side of the house to put her bike away. I considered Stuart, who considered me.

How about a cup of tea? I said. Scratches smarted at my wrists in the gap between cuff and glove. The red raised weals surprised me, a drop of

blood on one of them. Pruning the roses, I'd put Stuart's awful experience at the game to the back of my mind. Guilt surged over me: neglect, the old sin. And of Lily too. Now that I did feel bad about. Poor kid. I walked up the steps onto the porch and as I bent over to take off my shoes, Stuart walked away, down the steps onto the path. Lily sprinted up the steps across his wake, whisked the front door open and let herself in. I was alone on the porch. Brushed past, I thought. Or did I mean, brushed off? I turned the doorknob and entered the house.

Lily was munching on a Girl Guide biscuit. She had a stack of them stored in the hand she wasn't using for the remote. What are you watching, honey? I asked. Her reply was lost in saliva and crumbs. I passed on through to the kitchen to put the kettle on. It was a chance to see my work from above. I leaned towards the window and stared out. Well, wasn't I quite the pruner! I'd find out about feeding them properly next. In high summer the bumpy old path would be an aisle festooned with colour and scent. It would be a daily pleasure coming home, a sweet greeting all the way from gate to front door. Perhaps the next thing would be to re-concrete the path itself. And paint the fence. Paint the house too, actually. This spruce-up was long overdue. Lily behind me said, Mum, he didn't know what to do. I think he panicked.

I turned round. What, pardon? Who?

Dad, she said. Dad sort of panicked when that man collapsed. He didn't notice for a while, 'cause he was looking at the game, and all the parents started to shout and then some of them ran onto the field and Dad was really mad at them for a moment and blew the whistle to clear them off, and the girl whose father it was, she was their goalie and she was screaming and screaming…

Waves of fury and bewilderment played across her face. Shock too, I thought. And something else: embarrassment. I embraced her, felt her thin shoulders give as she leaned on me. I held her as I hadn't held her since she was a preschooler. My leggy twelve-year-old, my little bristler. She leaned

and leaned; I held and held – and then she pulled away. My sixth sense twanged, and I realised she would shortly announce she was off to Paige's to stay the night. I jumped in first. How about a hot chocolate?

Waiting for the milk to heat I talked to Lily. I explained that everyone would be shocked by what had happened, even though most people wouldn't have known the man or his daughter very well, if at all. I made sure she understood there was no need to be embarrassed by Stuart's reaction to the crisis, that he didn't really panic, that she was simply projecting her own panic onto her father, possibly all the more for realising, perhaps for the first time (I suggested gently and tactfully) that there are occasions in life when your father – previously all-powerful – can do nothing to avert tragedy.

Lily said, Jesus Mum, spare me your psycho-babble shit.

I was passing her a full mug of hot chocolate when she said that. It was as if she'd fired a paralysing dart. I was frozen in position, scrambling to process what she'd said, when she punched and knocked the mug clean out of my hand.

Lily! But she was gone. *Jesus! Spare me your psycho-babble shit* – Stuart's words in Lily's mouth. I felt sick.

The mug, miraculously, had bounced, and landed in one piece under the kitchen bench. No doubt a forensics expert could have worked out its trajectory by the splatter on the floor and walls. My jersey was drenched, the brown sticky mess seeping through to my skin. I stood in a milky slick. The front door slammed and I heard footsteps storm across the porch. She must have run full tilt down the path to the gate, because I heard it clang as she shot out of the property. Gone to Paige's. This time I would have to phone Stephanie and have her send Lily straight home. This was too much.

I stripped my top layers, and in my underwear cleaned up the mess. Then I carried all the dirty cloths, towels and clothing to the laundry, wrung them out and bunged them in the machine with Lily's soccer gear. I put on

clean clothes and sat on the bed to phone Stephanie. Paige picked up. Hi, I said. What are you and Lily up to?

Lily's not here. She went home ages ago, said Paige.

Yes, I know, I said. But I think she's probably just about to arrive on your doorstep again. Could you tell her to come home straight away please?

Okay. Hey, that was awful about the man dying at soccer, eh. They reckon he choked or something.

Choked? Who told you that?

Lily heard one of the parents say.

I doubted that Lily had heard anything like that, else she and Stuart would have mentioned it when they got home. I said so to Paige. I said, I don't think anyone really knows right now. It was probably something in his heart that gave out, that's probably what happened. It's very, very sad.

Yeah, said Paige, her voice tinged with excitement. I have to go now. Bye.

Bye, Paige, I said, and replaced the phone on Stuart's bedside table. Not much on it: a thriller, an empty packet of gum.

It was past four, and dusk was falling. I saw this not from the lengthening of any specific shadow, but from a generalised thickening and darkening in the air, a tarnish creeping in. I would give Lily twenty minutes and then set out to find her. I would finish the roses first; there was twenty minutes' calming work in that.

The first thing I noticed when I opened the front door was Stuart on the path amidst the rose prunings. The second thing was that Stuart was holding a pair of long-handled secateurs. My own short-handled ones were out of sight, buried in the waist-high pile of clippings that Stuart was building on top of my day's work. The third thing: he had revisited my roses, all the ones I'd finished with such care, and he had lopped them down to a stump. He was just now beheading the second-to-last standard rose on our path.

I saw red. I charged down the steps and more or less screamed at him to stop. He barely paused. Chop. Chop. A fuming rage built within me. *Fuck you, Stuart,* I yelled. *Fuck you!* He looked me straight in the eye, and turned back to the bush. You've never fucked me properly, he said to the rose. Chop. My fists balled up. They thumped my thighs. If I hit him – if I could wipe him flat! I dropped my head so I wouldn't have to see his face, or watch his hands at their derisory work. I squeezed past Stuart on the path, between the rose stumps and the pile of rose branches, headed blindly for the gate. I was rigid with fury, my breathing full as bull's roaring, so loud to me that I didn't notice the police car pull up and two uniformed police get out. I nearly walked straight into the policewoman as she entered our property.

Mrs Thomas? she said, smiling.

Lily! I gasped. Is it Lily? The policewoman renewed her smile, dialling it upwards to Full Reassurance, and introduced herself as Constable Emma McKay, who, along with her partner here, Constable Brendan Williams, was making routine enquiries to do with a death that had occurred this morning at a girls' soccer game. She believed she must have the right house, because Lily, yes they knew Lily – and therefore would that be Mr Thomas over there pruning the roses? The coach, hmmm? And Lily's father, yes? If I didn't mind they'd just have a quick word with Mr Thomas. It was all perfectly routine, and the death, terribly sad, awful, an awful situation especially with the kids around, how shocking. Terrible, but it happens, more than you'd think. Anyway, I gather you weren't at the game so we won't need to interview you just now, but maybe later we'll talk to your daughter again and perhaps you'd like to be there too, which is a good idea – but don't let us hold you up now, thank you very much, we'll just have a quick word with … Still smiling, she and her partner continued up the path.

That waist-high barrier of rose thorns separated my husband, Mr Thomas, Stuart, from the two constables. He made no attempt to walk

around it, but stayed on the far side close to the house, holding the secateurs open by one handle at his side. I was torn three ways, between a nagging anxiety about Lily *(… talk to your daughter again? Again?)*, my still-thumping fury, and the accusing presence of the police. Had they seen us arguing as they pulled up? Had they heard me swear at him? Had they read the Morse-pulse message pounding in my murderous heart? I caught a glimpse of my own secateurs at the base of the stack of rose clippings. From this distance, with the police standing on our path, they looked too much like a weapon for comfort. At least, I thought, the blades are closed. Unlike Stuart's secateurs, on which a sheen of wetness was just visible, where they had cut through stem after stem. Or was I imagining that – plant-sap, life-blood on the blades? At any rate, I went back along the path to where the three were talking. I stood just behind the constables, looking between their squared blue shoulders at my husband.

No, he was saying, I didn't see what happened. I'd just called their team offside and I thought the parents were up in arms about that, I thought that was why they were yelling. But when I realised, of course I stopped the game. I ran across to help but people were already doing CPR so I kept the children away. I kept them well away. I protected the children, so no, I don't really know anything more.

Mr Thomas, one of the children has told us that you offered the deceased some chewing gum as you went onto the field after half-time. Did you do so?

Me? No, who said that, of course not. I didn't even know the man.

Except from the referees' course, we understand, Mr Thomas.

Stuart had a quick re-think, and conceded that well, yes, he did meet James on that occasion but it was months ago, and anyway, he meant he didn't *know* him, not really *know*…

Constable McKay stiffened ever so slightly. We're just trying to ascertain how it happened so that his family can have closure, she said. Families get a lot of peace from knowing how their loved one died. There'd

be no blame attached, it's just one of those things. A tragedy. It helps the healing process, to understand. It appears he may have choked on something, Mr Thomas. Unfortunately that may have been what happened – it's what the ambulance staff think – although of course it might have been a heart attack. Or an aneurysm. These things happen. We'll have to wait for the coroner's report to be certain.

I watched my husband's pupils in their nearly undetectable shuttling as he made a series of rapid decisions. No, he said, with determination. I'm sorry I can't help you. Maybe it was his own chewing gum? Or maybe the little girl has me confused with one of the other parents?

Constable Williams noted this down in his notebook and Constable McKay told my husband that if that was his memory, then that was his memory, but he ought to bear in mind that other people had been present and may have, shall we say, different memories. And of course we realise it's always a shock when this kind of thing happens. But thank you very much and sorry to bother you, it's been no doubt a very stressful day. We'll be back in touch, yes, I think we may be back in touch. If necessary.

Stuart, a little white, said with careful courtesy, Well, I'm sorry I can't help you any more than that. What an awful tragedy for the family.

I led the way up the path to the gate. Constable McKay turned and called to Stuart: Good luck with the giving up.

To me she said, quietly, It certainly can make them very irritable.

At the patrol car she paused with the door half open: Lily will be tired. She biked all the way into the station. She'll be home soon. She didn't want a lift in the patrol car. She didn't want to be here while we talked to her father. I do see why not.

And she was sitting in the passenger seat when she rolled down the window and said: You have an honest daughter, Mrs Thomas. You can be very proud of that.

I waited at the gate until Lily arrived, pushing her bicycle in the deep settling dusk. Her face asked, and I nodded at her: Yes, they've been. Again

she queried me, again with a look, but this time I had to shake my head: No, he didn't.

In a tiny voice, Lily said, If I was that man's daughter, I'd so want to know how it had happened. Why didn't he just say? He wouldn't go to jail or anything, would he?

I thought of the prison Stuart lived in already, the strictures he laid on himself with his compulsive recastings of light and shadow. I could only shrug my shoulders: not that I didn't understand, not that I didn't care. I shrugged at the unbudgeable truth, to prove I could still move my shoulders under the weight.

We walked side by side along the path until we reached the pile of thorns. Lily went first, and I followed, the prickles catching momentarily at our clothes, like fingers clutching at the nearest passerby: a reflex action, without commitment. Together we went up the steps and kicked our shoes off on the porch. As we pushed the door open I said, I'll make you something hot to eat. You come with me into the kitchen. Tomorrow we'll talk.

Just one thing, said Lily. I have to tell him I'm giving up soccer.

She went into the lounge where Stuart was sunk on the couch watching motor racing and told him that. He pointed the remote at her and pressed the mute button in pretence at shutting her up. It wasn't really a jest, though he added a hard smile to the action. Can't give up, said Stuart. Can't let the team down now.

In the kitchen she sat at the table as I started getting dinner. Exterior darkness had turned the window into a mirror, but on the other side, I knew, was the path, cracked and bumpy but leading straight as an arrow to the gate. I observed Lily's reflection. She was brittle and exhausted, overgrown here, under-grown there, as straggly as the standard roses had been this very morning. Such a very long time ago. And as with the roses, her essential shape was visible, a shimmer both strong and graceful. Beautiful already to anyone looking, not for anything standard, but for Lily.

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