

Catching Up

by Gill Jackman

I can see them now—two hats in the distance. One, a battered Panama on my father, pipe clenched between his teeth, NHS glasses, stunted legs curved like a cowboy's. The other, a cricket hat on my brother, Robin, seven inches taller, half a chest wider, no rickets, no glasses, amused. He strides up the slope, big legs in big walking boots. His khaki shorts are crumpled but he is oblivious. I am drawn like a magnet to the disregard he displays and the private joke carrying him towards the horizon. In our house Robin reigned supreme in his capacity to say only 'what's for dinner?' and 'shut the door'. Unbeatable.

Of course, they are not walking together, they never were. They have both gone over the brow of the hill now.

I am the youngest, the child lost in the lacy May borders. Had my wide-eyed wonder been indulged, the shape of the family would have been circular, like a smile. As it was, we were drawn out in the wake of my father's mission. Falling behind was as inevitable as the COME ON ordered from the front. I used to hoppitty-skip to catch up, pattering like a sparrow on glass, heart clenched like a fist. While it would be wrong to say I wanted to compete, I was always keen to be seen, and for that I had to be ahead. You see the problem? Let me explain.

To be out in front was to be in his way. To be in his way was to make him rage. To be behind was contemptible and to imitate him was to be out in front. But he was my world.

"There's some blackies moved in two doors down" I said, keen to contribute as I forked my mashed potato into my gravy. I was eight, second year at Primary school. "I seen 'em in the garden."

"Don't you ever let me hear you say that again," he shouted. "It's coloured people and they're as good as you or me. And it's not 'there is', it's 'there are' and 'seen 'em? SEEN 'EM?"

I ran up the stairs and leant over the landing rail, a blazing omnipotence. “Pig” I spat at the door of the dining room below. He came out but by then I was on the run, my bedroom a fantasy land for a princess abducted at birth. Think. I had to think before I spoke. Words became dangerous floozies out to trap me. Slapped back, I was reduced to silence. Murderous silence.

Panic has never been allowed in my family, but escaping from my father’s thoroughfare was like getting bubble gum off my fingers beneath the lid of my school desk. As I pulled, the pink goo sagged onto my exercise books. I wound expanding lengths round the other hand but the gum dipped too fast for me to catch and stuck to both my forearms. Feverishly I tore them apart but every patch bonded and stretched into a luminous membrane. I moved to scratch my scalp and pink tendrils formed webs between my head and hands that massed into clumps as they rushed to adhere to themselves. All my strategies bound me in a stranglehold tighter than the one before.

If our childhood was miserable it was also predictable. We had a Morris Minor Traveller with wooden bits before they were cool. With the back down you could put three young children to bed in it. I longed for a sleek, sharky car with a boot. Jane’s dad, up the new suburban close had a sky-blue Ford Cortina. Her Mum wore shoes with kitten heels and sunglasses that narrowed like cat’s eyes at the corners. She seemed to climb from pavement to front seat bottom first, curvy in the glamorous light. Our cars were full of functional filth—bits of old duct tape and pens with elastic bands round them. Later, a navy-blue Singer-Vogue Estate accommodated our growing limbs and our spreading sweet wrappers. The Singer had vinyl seats and two pipes in the ashtray. On long journeys we lay in the dark, curled on fake leopardskin, the street lamps flicking over our humped sleeping bags. Arriving back from Reading late one night I stumbled towards the house. Groggy, I tripped on the wide lower step to the porch and fell, rib first onto the open threshold. Writhing for air, the only sound a desperate ‘quark’ as I gaped on a vacuum, I was lifted in my father’s sinewy arms and laid on the settee. There would be no death. Overruled by his solid presence, his calm left me awkward, exposed. I thrashed helpless as a herring on a boat deck, sucking, sucking from the blue eyes that stared, empty of hope, despair or reassurance. He did not respond to my feelings and he showed me no glimpse of his own. He was simply certain of my recovery so I swallowed my panic, convinced I must be wrong.

The Singer was fuelled on family resentment. My mother smoked her cigarettes and wished we took holidays in hotels; my father cursed the lack of road signs and snarled 'mate' at other drivers while Robin, Alison and I, squashed on the back seat, fought for space.

One breezy morning caravanning through a neighbourhood that rang with skipping songs, a sound like a bomb going off ripped through the car. I screamed. My father's SHUT UP, urgent enough to freeze the dust where it danced, amputated a second scream mid-flow. Nobody moved. I have never seen him so pale or so quiet as when he stepped onto that road, thick with children playing, to see what lay pinned between someone's garden wall and a caravan—our caravan, which he had failed to attach properly to the towbar. A two year old, her plump limbs hanging? A skull stamped into a collage of cotton and blood and bone?

This time, on his behalf, I did not breathe. I knew a life depended on it. Not the life of the older boy, leaping to catch the ball in his fingertips or the twins, playing cat's cradle on the wall, or their little sister, soft mouth smiling in the sun, but my life, inseparable from his. Silence held us rigid, as the children too, stopped their games and circled to point and whisper. We sat on the cusp of a moment where the stars cluster and explode, mountains start to roam in gangs and the seas evaporate.

But no-one was behind the caravan, just a scrape of paint and a smashed indicator. A steady breeze of absolution and easy gratitude rippled through the car. For once, as he inspected the vehicles and planned minor repairs my father's irritation was swept away but only luck had prevented death. Not logic or right action or thinking hard enough. Blame would have been total; disintegration complete. Petrification was preferable. So I sat, crushing my breath until he breathed.

The birds took up their song again.

If my father was in the house, I knew precisely which room he occupied and whether the door was open or closed. If his typewriter stopped tapping, I stopped. If he was out, getting to my bedroom was a breeze. I leapt the stairs two at a time, swung round the stairpost and thumped straight on. If he was in, I avoided every creak and sprang as needed, graceful as a deer. I knew the relationship between every yellow carpet swirl and board beneath

and landed in silence on a spot the width of a toe. The problem, I believed, was me, a me I could overcome if only I made enough effort.

Weekends were the worst. I shared with him a capacity to be enthusiastic but our interests clashed. One Sunday a friend from school drove my eagerness to share the music of Janis Joplin up so loud that I forgot him. Janis was gonna try so hard because it would be all her fault if she lost her man to someone else. She was screaming away any challenge when the door opened.

My father boomed louder. “What are you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to tape it.”

“Well, turn it down.” As he slammed the door, the backing singers crooned their refrain to “try just a little bit harder.”

I turned me down, and I turned in, swallowing him whole. At thirteen I cut myself with a razor blade and pioneered solvent abuse. It was a private act. He could not follow. He did not need to. By then I was learning my craft. I vomited rage and in the name of freedom, took the words and actions of others and pared them, with scalpel sharp precision. I got degrees, wrote theses and steam-rolled anyone less articulate who seemed to be in my way. They became the despicable, inadequate girl, crushed over and over again with the only tools at my disposal, but even had my logic been faultless I could never have actually killed her. A phantom from my father’s own darkness, it was she who never really existed. I know that now.

By the time he died, I was an adult, confident in my ability to dominate others. Knowing death was so close I tried to clear the way and it must have worked because I was the last person to see him coherent before his intravenous line in to the long sleep. Cancer was filling his lungs with liquid so instead of breathing he bubbled like a coffee percolator. That evening I sat in the dim corner of the hospice room and watched his fingers walking across his coverlet.

“What are you seeing?” I asked gently.

“Three little pigs,” he croaked. “Cartoons, dancing. One with a fiddle. One with a flute. Round and round. And Steam-Boat Willy at the helm. They’ve

gone now,” and he let his hand drop. Propped up, quiet, as the early April evening faded away he surrendered to those gentle hospice workers as he could never have let go at home. Yet he lingered on.

When he opened his eyes, I told him—my voice quavering, my face cheerful. I said it as he would have said it; logical, deductive, absolute. By his own standards he had no choice but to hear.

“You don’t have to worry,” I said. “Due to your unorthodox methods of bringing us up, we can look after ourselves.” He laughed, but I sucked my tears and glands and sobs into a knot at the back of my throat and smiled them out of sight. Here was proof I could manage. Look, no emotion. To the last, the only possibility of communicating lay in using his language. I spoke it to him and I pulled myself together with it but inside I was broken. If he was after truth, ‘we can look after ourselves’ wasn’t it. I meant ‘you can’t do anything for us anymore. You’re released from duty. You can die now’ but truth is more than logic. Bigger than he knew. With the force of water cascading three hundred feet, it was love that swept me beyond the brim of my horror to where I could hold him afloat and stroke his exhausted skull, longing with all my soul for nothing but his comfort and peace.

The old enthusiasm still flickered—even for his morphine-induced friends, skipping in and out of the luminous circle in front of his half-closed eyes. Disney had always made life worthwhile, particularly in the hungry, dirty thirties and now it seemed this legacy was leading him off like the Pied Piper, but still something was in the way. He would not tell me what. I pulled the chair up to the high-sided bed and he peered at me over the lowered cot rails.

“What is it?” I said.

He looked away, a child who would not meet my eyes.

“Come on, if there’s something bothering you, I can’t sort it out unless you tell me what it is, can I?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

He thrashed that time, hooked by his own logic. His body may have been wasted to the bone but his mind never completely lost power.

“Mummy and Alison must never know.” He fixed those blue eyes on mine. “And you’re not to touch it.”

“OK. I promise I won’t tell them.”

He grabbed me by the wrist and pulled himself forward. “It’s in the loft.” I nodded and stared back. “What is?”

“A gun. It’s hidden. Mummy thinks I got rid of it. I never did.”

Pulled into my father’s orbit, I responded with logic, not surprise. Rationality, too ingrained in us to not be at the heart of a crisis.

“Where?”

But he had always worked to his own agenda and he picked the numbers to suit. “I brought the bullets back on Freddy Laker.” He paused and looked about him.

“But the gun?” I insisted.

Good at telling stories, he shifted his focus and drew me into that conspiratorial glamour that makes children shuffle closer as the teacher bends with hushed voice. Ready for the secret, willing to be seduced for the sake of having a tiny part of him, I took my seat for this last performance.

“I got it from a Korean veteran but it had no bullets.” He shrugged and pursed his lips. All pain had vanished, and he pointed one finger in the air, “What good is a gun with no bullets?” Good point. The sort of point that called a halt to all my questions and left me hanging on his answer. “So I had to wait until I could find some that would fit. I kept the gun, oiled and wrapped for a long, long time. It was on that first trip round America that I met a soldier returning from Vietnam, and there, on the back seat of a Greyhound bus, he gave me the bullets. Six of them. Brought them all the way back on the airbus stuffed down an empty metal cigar tube.” He laughed at his ingenuity. I knew that feeling of getting one over and turning it into a tale. This was where his spirit had always resided. Mine too—in

the palm of his hand, the story of his viewpoint. I would forgive this God anything if only he would shine on me one more time. This is the nature of a battered woman.

But I knew he was avoiding something. His reticence surprised me. Was the gun for the family's protection all that time? Was he trying to protect me now? Outside in the tiny courtyard the heady perfume of my childhood spilled from the neat rows of wallflowers. That child still sits, freshly ironed among daisies looking deep into the pansies her daddy has planted. Spring hopes eternally.

My father just could not bring himself to tell me exactly where the gun was. As for why it was, considering the poverty of his childhood I did not find it illogical or odd that a man who kept permanganate of potash from 1938, or a job lot of tinned cheese from 1968 should keep a gun in his full-to-the-rafters loft. I suggested that he rang my brother.

Surprised, he softened, moved to find that the telephone by his bed was free to use, just for him and didn't cost anything.

"Not everyone gets in here," he said. "They must have known I was a college lecturer."

Robin was at home.

"Daddy needs to tell you something," I said. "It's important."

In clipped tones, punctuated with 'have you got that now?' my father unloaded his burden. I concentrated hard, despairing at each twist and turn, glad it was not all down to me but when I took the phone back I found that Robin had done little beyond making the right noises. As I'd visualised the rafters left to right along the floor from the watertank and followed to some mixed red and yellow wiring, he had said, "Mmm. Yes. Right" and then to me "I don't know what that was all about. He's lost it. I think he's just hallucinating."

In that second I found myself tumbling through a constructed world that was not of my making and felt the gap between brother and father that Robin was not going to straddle. A gap that I had tried so hard to fill I'd

suspended not just disbelief, but myself. But perhaps Robin was right, perhaps this fading man had just lost it, and where did that leave me?

Ten years earlier my brother and I met at my dad's bedside. My father had spent the night watching hedgehogs decompose in the green sculpted carpet and ants flood the bathroom. A dread-filled mother and sister who had followed him around until dawn called us home after watching him try to build a computer with toilet rolls. By the time I saw him he was coherent enough to ask, "Do you remember that tea-towel that turned into a mouse with two ears?" Had I become as vengeful and as cruel as he could be, I would have withered him there and then.

"All mice have two ears."

"They're not born from tea-towels though."

"No, they aren't so you must be stupid, or mad, if that's what you think."

"But I saw it."

"You can't have done. Try harder. What did you see?" but he was already small and yellow; waxy and looking from side to side.

Robin arrived two hours after me in his cross-country dash from the same city we lived in as adults. As we listened together and saw this man confronted with flashes of his lost night, our smiles broadened. Both mother and sister were convinced he had a brain tumour but our shared hunch grew that this sixty-eight year old man was coming down from his first hallucinogenic trip. A man with tinned cheese who keeps old bedsteads to grow his peas up is a roots and berries man. When dad said that someone had told him that Indian Nigella seeds made good curry we sniggered together. The seeds turned out to be Datura, as the poisons unit at Kew confirmed. 'Yes dad—of course. It's the sort of mistake anyone could have made,' but we grinned about the green giant in the garden because we were the children who had run to ask it to take us away from all this. And it had lifted us onto its shoulders to show us the view.

Somehow, Robin stopped trying to catch up at an early age while managing effortlessly to overtake. He didn't wait for me and he didn't take me with him, he just left and never looked back. When I asked him about our

childhood he said he couldn't remember anything before the age of twenty-three.

I remember him. I worshipped him, even though he said nothing for years but 'what do YOU want'. Two years after my father died, I walked into his kitchen to see him bending my cream gold-edged wedding invitation in half. "When's this wedding then?" he grunted.

"This wedding. My wedding mate. And you've got to make a speech at it and give me away. I told you about it months ago and it's on that invite you're currently screwing up. Thanks for being so excited."

He looked at me with the amused tolerance I adored. He never took offence. I sometimes think he was autistic, cut off from the meanings most of us shared but harbouring no resentment and doing his best to be good enough to join in. Odd that there was not a metaphorical bone in his body and yet for me, he, the Beatles and Bob Dylan were almost interchangeable. Big brothers, rock and roll stars, they're all heroes.

Now, I simply cannot imagine how he got away with his behaviour as a teenager. The ceiling beneath his bedroom used to shake where the green mono record player roared on the carpet above. As a rule we were treated to Beatles singles in chronological order but 'All You Need Is Love' was the one stuck on replay. No metaphor in that. When he went to university, he stole my copy of Revolver. I should have been pissed off but I was proud.

I imprinted on Robin like a greylag gosling, attached myself like a new-hatched cartoon duckling attaches itself to Tom or Jerry. Amid the shushings and the shocks as we contorted our minds and souls to avoid my father's exacting criticism, Robin's response meant everything. I can't think of a better definition for Rock and Roll. His detached manner, his embarrassment at his little sister was just a hazard of being my father's son. What mattered was that there was another way, a way that Robin knew about. A way involving hallucinogenic drugs and living communally and playing the guitar; a way that involved keeping road signs in your bedroom and having Christmas decorations up all year round and most important of all, not letting anyone in.

I wake, screaming from a nightmare where my sweet soothing liquorice has fallen out of reach leaving endless, black space. I am not supposed to have

liquorice. I have cleaned my teeth. My mile-high Bakelite door-handle turns. A seven year old Robin holds my hand through the bars of my cot, crooning before the rest of the family arrive to tell me my torment is not real.

Aged four, the late summer evening longs to be played in. He tiptoes into that lonely bedroom and lullabies me to sleep.

At seventeen, through the meningitis compressing my skull like a band of iron I wail 'I want Robin'. I never knew until his funeral that his response had been to sit beside me through the long, long night.

This is the warmth I cling to or else it's all just been the blind leading the blind and to where? Where am I left now he's disappeared into ashes and air?

"Ow, OW, stopit, please PLEASE sto-o-op it." I am at the top of the landing, far from my mother who is a staircase, a living room and a dining room away. Even the hatch is closed. I am pincerred into the corner by him, let go but imprisoned by sudden punches that dig into my stomach or my shoulder. I defend with my arms, or pull up my leg but I am always too late. He laughs. I laugh, but I want it to stop. I struggle to breathe.

"Deadleg," he says, as his fist hits the back of my thigh and my knee buckles.

If cats and crocodiles were human we would call them psychotic. Robin's eyes were blue slits.

I plead, I whimper and wail. I am too small to fight back and win. Eventually I have no choice but to open my mouth and scream long and loud until someone hears and stops him. He is disappointed. He looks disgusted with me. What's the point of sisters unless you can torment them? My mother comes and shouts at him, "Leave her alone," and he skulks off, hands in his pockets, bored again.

I learned to scream every time I didn't like something but I pleaded for more than mercy. Physical pain is quickly buried. I would beg for it—arm up the back; tea towels cracked on my legs; tickling. Once my mother disturbed the three of us, sister pulling my arms, brother my legs. I know I had asked to be stretched.

I took whatever attention I could get.

As I grew, I took refuge in the belief that we were all helpless. Robin's statement 'I don't remember anything before I was twenty three' had to be ironic. As if any of us could really forget. I perceived my father's laugh when I mentioned his 'unorthodox methods of bringing us up' as a faint acknowledgement of his brutality. If we shared nothing else, we surely shared an awareness of our demons? And although we seemed unable to escape, at least we knew, however dimly, how the story went didn't we? This what I miss so much. My father, my brother and I could be so confident in our certainties that we convinced other people quite easily, but we never really convinced ourselves. And now I have no-one to play with and see only a grin, fading like the Cheshire cat.

Now, struggling for words, that caustic voice, 'Well you've got loads of bloody paper—USE IT' prods me on, but the benevolence I long for never settles in my soul. I needed my dad and my brother to include me and when they didn't I tried to understand them instead. When I couldn't, I made excuses for them: busy with more important things, moving in mysterious ways but performing wonders. I did anything and everything to keep away my suspicion that I simply wasn't good enough to love even a tiny bit.

What could I do but copy them? My crushed self grew rough in speech, intolerant of nonsense; my battering manner a device meaning 'I love you. I know you'. Words too hard to say and the funniest thing? Midway between the two years that separated their deaths, Robin's humour, 'the irony is (the bastard) he always thought he was so bloody right— and he was, he was.' Given a different Dad, Robin would have been a gentle boy and I a fairy girl but so carelessly attached to our father's towbar we had to find our own way out of the car crash of our childhood.

So we found one. Even laid out on the trolley, all six foot one at four-thirty in the morning Robin looked like he was smirking, but his heart had given out. No warning. For me, the final metaphorical eruption; a love far too big for its unworthy boots.

I cling to the warm May weekend, thick with fibreglass dust and flaking cardboard when we hauled our booty from the forbidden loft and out of the front door. A FineFare bag of old Dettol bottles, those 1960s sleeping bags,

ten Kenwood mixer bowls, film chemicals, empty printer cartridges, kettles, toasters, a small mixing desk; back-breaking, lung-filling work, every corner swathed in black. What Sleeping Beauty would we find behind those cobwebs? What Ancient Hag under the eaves? We felt our way across the chipboard, never knowing where it would give way. Across the treacherous floor we dragged our treasure, stacks of 1920's records: T.S.Eliot reading The Four Quartets, Vita Sackville-West lecturing the Townswomen's Guild; His Master's Voice, ensuring, even from the grave, that nothing should go to waste. Over and over we climbed the aluminium ladder with HAVE YOU LOCKED THIS LADDER INTO PLACE? printed on duct tape where it could not be missed, and emerged, wheezing from the black hole, weighted down with wonders that did not stand up to the light. Aladdin's cave turned by degrees from gold to simple stone to dust; Arcadia become car-boot sale; God become mortal; function become filth. I was standing by the skip counting the redundant reel-to-reels and the Dansette record-makers, wondering 'what should I keep', 'what should I keep?' when into the sunlight they came, brother and brother-in-law, bearing the box.

They shuffled closer to each other when they saw my mother but she showed no surprise. "I knew. I knew it was there," she said. A lifetime of irritations flattened her voice. "He told me he'd got rid of it but your father?" She looked wearily at this second full skip. My sister deferred, but I, childlike again at the greatest hidden treasure, wanted to play with it. Reluctantly, Robin pulled away the cloth. I reached towards it. The bewildered look that spread across his face stopped my hand in mid-air sure as if he had squeezed it in his own and bent to brush my cheek with his soft lips.

You do not give your little sister a gun, even when she is forty.

And now I'm out in front but the race is over, no-one to get it right for, no humour to outpace as I skid into open space. I can still see Robin, diverging from my father on the flat, heading for the hills. I wave and wheel about, running to the river where the green giant sleeps now, his beard streaming its song into the current.