

Arabella

In my third grade class at St Mary's Elementary there were two Mandy's, two Amanda's, three Anna's and an Annabelle. But there was only one Arabella at St Mary's, and she was in grade five.

I sat next to Geoffrey in school. He was the new boy, and I was the quiet boy, so our teacher Miss Marsh sat him next to me. His family had moved to Melbourne from Sydney. Arabella was his sister. I lived on Beech street, lined with Liquidambar, which dropped spiky brown balls in autumn. Oak street, where Geoffrey lived, had Elms. Our streets ran parallel, and shared a lane that ran along our back fences, and we discovered that if we stood on the second fence rail each could see into the backyard of the other. Our backyard once had an ornamental plum. Mum liked to sit under it and read, but Dad cut it down one spring, just as it was in flower. Kurt, a kid who lived up the street by the corner milk bar, came over to help. He was twelve at the time, and went to the State School with all the jobs and bogans. I remember I watched him struggle with the hacksaw while Dad grew testy, and I realized for the first time how short my father was.

Geoffrey's backyard had a Ficus with branches low enough for Arabella but too high for us. Afternoons I watched her from our back step as she straddled a bough in kneetop pleats, with her head in the clouds and her nose in Casper or Richie Rich until I could bear it no longer, and had to go inside and squirm on the couch until my ardor subsided and my eyes adjusted to the dim ceiling light. Along one side of their back fence was a shed with a corrugated steel roof that had once been a stable, now a playroom where Arabella mustered legions of plush toy ponies, and where Geoffrey (and I by extension) was forbidden to go. She had short blonde hair and freckles, and she sucked her thumb when she was puzzled, which gave her an overbite. To Arabella, adults were 'dipsticks', other kids were 'dags' or 'drongos', Geoffrey was a 'sook', and I was nobody.

To see her at her home, or at school where she went every day, I found overwhelming. But when it was unexpected, the least glimpse of her burned my bare gooseflesh like the hot grille of the wall furnace as I raced to get dressed on a winter morning. I remember a midwinter morning mass in July. Fat Father Doolan, who wore his Essendon footy jumper visible under his surplice when the Bombers were in the top five, had begun his homily, while I stared as still as I could into the electric flicker of the chancel lamp to make it disappear. Dad sat beside me. He couldn't fault me for fidgeting, but suspicious of my rapture, he frowned from time to time with his ears.

There was a sound behind us. Doolan paused and beamed. "Good onya," he said, marking the tardy family that tried to make their unobtrusive entrance through the wrought iron of the porch. "Pull up a pew." They snuck in our row, backs bent like soldiers shuffling low through trenches, and I saw that she was at the head of them, and she sat down, an arm's length from me, and only my father between us. If he were invisible, and if I had dared glance at her face, I wouldn't see her for the bright black afterimage blistered on my eye, but I felt the kicks like little heartbeats, that her stiff scuffed heels delivered on their backswing to the bottom of our bench.

Through the liturgy I tried to glimpse, beneath Dad's arm or behind his back, as though it was the hint of exotic plumage hidden in thick foliage, her blonde bangs, the umber underhollow of her knock-knees, what I thought was the pretty tip of her tucked up nose, but proved to be the knuckle of her pinky, cocked to pick.

At last, as the front rows filed out for Communion Dad turned to Arabella and smiled. He made a hitchhike motion with his thumb at the priest. "Doolan loves his footy. And his four-and-twenties. Ya know, Terry Daniher's a mate of mine."

"Pfffootball," she said.

"Ah right, you're from Sydney." He looked down and saw she had palominos

hand-stenciled on her purse. “You like horseracing?”

At this she glowed and began to talk at a clip. “Mum’s taking me to the Memsie Stakes in a fortnight. We saw the Melbourne Cup on telly last year, it was Just a Dash by Whiskey Road out of Native Lass.”

“Just a Fluke by The Skin of His Teeth out of Left Field.”

She snorted. “Mister Giacometti, you’re a dork.”

“Da-ad,” I tugged urgently at his sleeve and tried to whisper, “people are staring.”

Embarrassment made him bark at me. “Sam, don’t be a sook.” I turned white. Arabella laughed, and it was time for us to rise and receive the blessed Eucharist.

I despaired ever to speak to her, and was at once resentful and in awe of Dad, who could connect with her so casually. But next Friday I had my chance. Morning recess, while Geoffrey and Julian monkeyed on the bars, I found myself distracted by the sight of a rectangular circus trailer, parked on the edge of the bitumen quad between the church and the school.

I pointed. “What do you reckon that is?”

Near the trailer two laborers in paint-specked overalls began to unpack the steel struts heaped in the back of their ute.

“It’s for the fate tomorrow,” said Julian, whose Mum made lamingtons and vanilla slices, and had the inside track on such facts.

The bell rang. Julian dropped, and Geoffrey fell, to the ground; and when they’d wiped their hands on their schooldacks and tucked in the long tongues of their short shirts they racked off. But I paused for a moment and stared.

The trailer was gloomy green, and on its side in brighter colors was a cartoon soldier in a nutcracker’s hat, who led by the bridle a long-eyelashed pony. Balanced side-saddle on the pony’s back, a white frocked colleen made mirth, throwing both arms in the air in reckless ecstasy, and I knew, I knew that I had my entree with Arabella.

The giddy schoolday wore. As full up with impatience as a bottle of milk, I would or could not attend, until at the last bell, “almost forgot,” as we ran for our bags, “tomorrow’s fete,” said Miss Marsh, and I stopped and came at once sharp into focus, “from ten to four, be sure to tell your parents.”

As soon as Mum had walked me home I ran out of her hand straight round to Geoffrey’s house. They were in the rumpus room. Arabella popped a blown globe in and out of the L of a bayonet mount and listened to my news.

“Pony rides!” she oohed. “You sure?”

I said I was.

“You gunna go?” I asked.

“Mu-um?” she leaned back to call out, turned her head and exposed her long throat, “can we go to the fete?”

They could. Arabella’s nose and cheeks shone pink. Eight perfect pearls, six permanent, came out and sat on her lower lip. Her smile cast an enchantment over me, so that I was hot and cold, faint and jubilant at once, and if any words had come into my head I would have poured them out to prolong as far as I could the moment, if I had been able to speak.

Then her Mum called out, and Arabella turned and sprang away on long light pins like a foal. I went with Geoffrey to his backyard, and we sat on the patio bricks stained black by her figs, and chucked stones and joked and gabbed, and conjectured how the fete would be, and wedged sharpened twigs in the gaps in the brickwork, until it was teatime and I had to go.

I ran and skipped home. By the nature strip in front of our house I stooped and picked up a Liquidambar pod, spiky like the flower of a cleric’s morningstar, and twirled the stem between my thumb and forefinger so quick that it broke. Then I came in and washed my hands and sat down at our kitchen counter. Impatient for tomorrow I plunged myself in turn into a hot dinner, a warm bath, cold bedsheets that I twisted round me, burrowed under the doona until I soon grew hot again, and stuck out my foot, and rested my burning cheek

against the cool brick wall alongside my bed, while moonlight reflected in the roof of Arabella's shed cast the shadow of a bare branch on my floor that swept around slowly like the hour hand of a clock.

In the morning as I gulped through my Weet-Bix I asked Mum how soon could we go.

But she held a hand to her mouth. "Oh Sam," she said, "Nanna's coming for lunch."

"But the fate —"

"I'm sorry Sam. She's seventy. She's not well. She's coming over special."

My spoon drooped in my bowl.

A ten o'clock Nanna turned up out of puff. "My heart you know, let me get out my pills."

"What are you taking, Romilda?" asked Mum.

"Horse tranquilizers," said Dad and went to turn on the telly. But his mother was a small woman, shorter even than him.

"Coffee? Tea?" said Mum.

Nanna came in and fished through her bag. "No trouble, just some hot water for me, with a slice of lemon." She saw me and her eyes went wide. "My little bachoukool!" she cooed. "I bring you un regalo, a present!" It was a porcelain Jesus, about fifteen centimetres high, with a stiff key in his back. When she wound him up and set him on the table he raised and lowered his outstretched right arm in a slow karate chop. "Che figata!"

I mooned and moped at the kitchen counter while the Magpies and the Bombers battled offstage, and Mum and Nanna chatted and rolled knots of gnocchi on the convex tines of forks. Laid out on the counter the potato dumplings covered four teatowels, and I watched and waited for the tall copper pot to boil.

"Get Dad," said Mum, when it was nearly done.

"Come on Daniher . . ." growled Dad, and unconsciously he crossed himself and leaned forward on his beanbag to follow the trajectory of the torpedo punt.

“Oh . . . you dickhead!” Then he saw me. “What?”

When lunch was eaten the adults lingered and I languished. Dad snuck out after halftime, and I sat slumped and toyed with my fork. At three Nanna rose to go. She kissed me, stale sweat and garlic, rubbed my cheeks with her thumb, where my dirty tears had dried, and finally left.

“Can we go now?”

“It’s late,” said Mum.

But she saw my face, and we soon set off. I clenched my teeth and clutched a two dollar bill and trotted at her side, and we passed kids and parents coming the other way.

Many stalls were empty. I saw the same two laborers from yesterday unscrewing bolts. A man in a peaked cap packed away the lucky dip. Mandy, her face sticky with fairy floss, saw me and said hi. I saw Father Doolan standing with a stooped old lady. He rested his fat hand on her shoulder while he talked and she nodded. By the green trailer was a coin operated mechanical horse ride, where a seven year old girl inspected the slot and asked her Mum for a twenty cent piece. We bought the last lamington from Julian’s Mum.

All the way home I felt somehow both hollow and queasy full. Mum asked if I was okay, but I said I wanted to be alone, and went by myself to sit on the back step. As I opened the screen door I saw, in the low branch of the Ficus in Geoffrey’s yard, my Arabella, sitting with Kurt and showing him something in a Jughead. Kurt saw me come out. I froze, but he stood up and in friendly innocence he waved, and as he stood the branch bent and buckled and suddenly snapped, and the two of them toppled out of view.

But I found this neither funny nor just, and I made fists until my fingernails pierced the skin of my palms.