

THE BEGINNING

HOW DO YOU BEGIN FROM THE BEGINNING WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE THE FULL FACTS, when much of the story belongs to another, in another time, another place — how then do you add flesh to the bones of history?

This was my dilemma. Trying to put into place the pieces that weren't mine to know, or mine to tell — and yet they were. For if the missing pieces weren't mine, then why did they affect me so? And so the secrecy remained for decades. The whys and what ifs of the past that had become the present.

Then one hot summer day, my mother and I were sitting under the shade of a gnarled gum tree, its deformed trunk a testament to the ever-changing seasons of flood and drought. We were alone, no siblings, husbands or children — we were in a time capsule — quite detached. After decades of skipping around the wounds of the years, there seemed very little to say.

I looked across the lawn into her garden crowded with roses, lavender and Chinese lanterns, past the white cement statue of a Grecian woman holding a basin of water on her shoulder, and saw, hidden among the plants, a small stand of watermelon red gerberas.

'Gerberas. I've always hated them you know,' I said idly, rooted in the past, my words dancing around in the hot mid-morning sun.

'So did I ... for a while,' my mother replied rather startled, and our words sparked, touched each other. And the years of pain spun away as I looked into her face, worn from the hardship of life, wrinkled and old, with hair that had thinned and was now white, her mouth that was still smiling and her eyes that were still green.

'Why, Mum?'

'I had no choice,' she said still smiling – without explanation we knew – we knew the questions and where they came from.

'He was so hard, always so hard, and you let him get away with it.'

'You don't understand Judy. I had no choice; in those days we did what we had to do,' and she shrugged her thin shoulders.

I reached over and touched her wrinkled hand, the brown spots of old age like large freckles spreading across her dried up skin.

'Then tell me ... so I can understand.'

And so my mother began to speak, and I sat for hours listening to words somersault from her heart, emptying her from the prison of silence.

I now re-tell her story as it was told to me on that hot mid-morning as we sat under the shade of the old gum tree in her garden. And as the sun meandered across the sky, I listened to this old lady talk of her life, of her sadness and fears, of the whys and wherefores of her beginnings, and as her words fell they began to crack the shell around my heart.

And so I begin this chronicle with my mother's story.

My mother was the youngest child of ten children. Her mother – my grandmother – went into post-partum depression and neglected my mother from the moment of her birth. Two months later, my grandmother walked down to the railway line and threw herself under a train.

The oldest of the ten children, my Aunt Dorry, had not long married and was pregnant with her own child. My mother and the rest of her siblings were now divided up. Aunt Dorry took some, others were placed in foster care, and my mother, now three months old, went with her father up North Queensland way. He was a logger – an Irish logger who owned a team of bullocks, dragging felled trees out of the forest and down to the timber mill.

My mother stayed with him until, during a wet season the cart the bullocks were pulling slipped on the muddy cleared

land and went over the top of him. He died a lonely agonising death, his body crushed beyond repair and at eight years of age my mother was an orphan.

The police brought her down to Brisbane to her older sister Dorry.

‘You can’t stay here Madge, I have enough to do. I’ll talk to Father Peter tomorrow and see what he says.’

My mother ended up in foster care in a Catholic boarding house, where she spent most of her time working for nothing. She was free labour, not permitted to go to school and her life consisted of laundry, ironing, peeling vegetables, scrubbing floors on her hands and knees – and being thrashed.

‘They were hard days,’ she said smiling across at me. ‘All I had to eat was what was left on the boarders’ plates or what I stole out of the pantry.’

She went on. ‘I had just turned nine when Mrs Smith’s seventeen year-old son came home from boarding school, and that’s when the trouble started.’

My mother had to push furniture across the doorway to stop him trying to get to her at night. Finally, after a severe thrashing from his mother for telling lies about her son, she dressed herself in as many clothes as she could and fled, jumping out the window in the early hours of the morning, and became a street person at the tender age of nine years and two months. A drainpipe under a bridge became her home, her existence monitored by other homeless people who took pity on this thin dirty child.

She turned her head and looked me before returning her gaze to the gerberas. ‘I could still take you to that very same drainpipe. Every time I pass the area I remember.’

My mother continued without pause. ‘After staying with the homeless for a couple of months I knew I would end up living this way forever if I didn’t do something, so one day I walked into town, and then walked into factory after factory looking for work.’

For my mother the last stop of the day before returning to her drainpipe under the bridge was a chutney factory.

'I walked into the office and asked to see the boss. I must have looked such a mess,' my mother laughed as I continued to listen. 'I hadn't had a bath all that time and one of the women had hacked off my hair because it was full of nits.'

Within hours my mother was bathed, her hair trimmed with nail scissors, and dressed in new knickers and a too-large uniform that covered her half-starved body. That day she started work in the chutney factory. All she was required to do was to keep the floor swept and make tea for the boss, Mr Less.

Mrs Less cleaned out a small storeroom, and at the end of her first day my mother had a new home, a home she lived in for seven years.

'I even had my own toilet and shower,' she said laughing.

'What about food? Did you get paid?' I asked, incredulously.

'They brought me food every day, and no I didn't get paid ... then. The boss's wife bought me everything I needed. Clothes, shoes. Everything.'

When my mother turned sixteen Mr and Mrs Less helped her to get a flat with two other girls working at the factory, and now my mother had a real home. The day they moved her into the flat they bought her a bed, lamp, floor rug, chest of drawers and handed her a bankbook. The factory had paid her for the last seven years and had put it into a bank account. My mother had a bankbook with the Commonwealth Bank.

'They were good people.'

'Yes Mum, they were.'

I was becoming cramped sitting on the white metal chair under the gum tree but didn't want to move. It was imperative for me to hear the rest of my mother's story; the chance and time may never come again, and I was determined to dig into her heart — for her story made me who I was, who I am. So I sat, very still, and held my breath willing her to continue.

My mother remained at the factory, and she also began to have a social life. She started going out with her flatmates. The girls were taking lessons at the Arthur Murray dance studio, and persuaded my mother to go along. It wasn't long before she became a very good dancer. She had found her love and her talent — dancing. Now I understood her need to dance, the beautiful sway in her walk. She was a born dancer.

My mother turned twenty, still at the factory, only now she was in charge of her section, and was still living in the same flat with the same girls, the sameness giving her the security she needed.

Aunt Dorry was trying to get her to marry her husband's nephew Ken. She was considering the idea, but he was mean and rather spiteful, constantly reminding her that she was poor and uneducated, while he was going to university.

This one particular Friday night, one of her flatmates asked her to go to a special function. It was a cricket presentation, a dinner dance. Her decision to go that night shaped her destiny! Shaped my destiny.

At that instant I thought 'what if, what if?' But in the very next instant, I thought 'Why bother, I am too pragmatic for what ifs'. And so my mother met my father.

'He was so handsome with his blue-black hair and brown eyes and his broad shoulders. You have his shaped face,' she said, turning to me, the same set to the jaw ... maybe that's why you two never got on – you were too much alike.'

My mother was enamoured by his charm, his intensity, his dignified composure, his quiet countenance, as he accepted his medal of excellence in the game of cricket.

After walking out with my father for several months my mother yielded to his insistence of living together.

'He was my first boyfriend and I loved him. Or something,' she said, with a faraway look in her eyes.

'Mr and Mrs Less disliked him. He had been married you see ... still was. They actually preferred Ken to your father.'

'What do you mean Mum? "Still was"? Wasn't he divorced?' I asked.

'No! The Catholic Church wouldn't allow him to remarry. It was a sin!'

I held my breath.

My mother sat under the shade of the gum tree and simply shook her head, and I suddenly remembered a terrible argument I'd overheard one night several decades ago.

'Why do you pick on her so, she's only a child!' my mother had said.

'She's a little bastard, that's all she is,' was my father's reply.

'That's not her fault, that's the fault of the bloody micks,' and even though I had heard my stepfather say those very same words, 'they are only bastards after all', to unexpectedly recall those words coming out of my father's mouth now held an entirely new meaning.

I had been despised by the very one who fathered me, and my hate for him rose again, like poison vapour, gagging me, not for me this time, but for my mother.

I remained silent.

My mother continued, almost against her will, quietly venting the full fury of rage against the Catholic Church and the times that made men the way they were.

'You have to understand Judy, times were different then. It was never the good old times, not for me anyway. Your father had ... a situation. One Sunday he returned home from a cancelled cricket match, and found his so-called best friend in his bed with his wife and his six-year-old son locked in another room.'

My mother went silent and I thought she had finished speaking of the things of the past and I wasn't quite sure whether to prod her to continue, or leave well enough alone. I was silent about my past and I should respect her privacy in the things that she wanted to bury, and I moved to stand, but she went on.

'He nearly killed him, beat him to a pulp he did, and he was charged with attempted murder. It was in all the papers at the time, but because it was called a crime of passion he got off, and was allowed to keep John — she was an unfit mother according to the judge. So now he had a small boy to look after, and that's why he wanted me to move in with him. And I did.'

My mother lived with my father and my brother John for about a year, in Brisbane. My father's past followed him and they eventually moved out west, out Goondiwindi way, and lived in a tent.

'Where did he work, Mum? What was his education like?'

'He worked in the timber mill and somehow,' she paused, 'he bought a small piece of land.'

She continued.

'He could read and write. Just. You have to understand that education was very difficult in our time. Even so, he decided to build our own house.'

My mother laughed. 'As a matter of fact, every Saturday and Sunday because of his cricket I was left to dig every post hole for every house stump with John helping, and I pregnant with you. He was a lovely little boy, John, very shy, and he called me Mum almost from the beginning,' she said smiling.

So with the relatively cheap timber from the local saw mill, the house rose from the ground, and all the time my mother, father and John lived in a tent with no amenities. Water came from the river, cooking was on a circle of stones, and the toilet was made when my mother dug a hole in the hard baked earth. And with the inevitability of life, she grew larger with me.

My mother came into early labour in the tent and she walked across a flooded creek holding onto a disused barbed wire fence and with John holding onto the back of her skirt. A neighbour delivered me, a blue ugly scrap of humanity that had arrived far too early, and the woman then wrapped me in cotton wool to keep me warm and placed me in a discarded shoe box, my first cradle.

Hours later my mother walked home again, holding the shoe box under one arm and again she negotiated the flooded creek with my brother holding onto the back of her skirt. She fully expected that she'd soon have to bury the tiny mewling child in the hard unforgiving earth.

The house grew, slowly, painstakingly, and so did I.

'Your first birthday treat was the lick of an orange,' my mother said. 'You were so tiny, so doll-like.' She laughed a laugh of happier times, of remembrances past. 'The neighbour who delivered you suggested I enter you in the baby show that was coming to the area. The first prize was a Singer sewing machine.'

I knew the story, had heard it many times, yet my mother in her twilight years needed to repeat her oft told tale.

'It was winter,' she began. 'Louise, that was her name, she knitted you the most wonderful outfit to wear. When you were dressed and sat among the beefy babies, you looked even more

like a doll and,' she laughed, 'you won of course and I had a sewing machine. I couldn't sew with it though. I didn't know how, so it just sat in the tent.'

My mother paused again, frowning, working backward through her memories.

'I first sewed with it at Beryl's house. She was the ganger's wife up along the coast. It was such fun then. She taught us to sew – the four of us.' She smiled. 'We made our dance frocks at Beryl's and instead of hand-sewing dresses and pants for you kids, I sewed them on the machine. It was fun then. The most difficult thing I sewed was your silk petticoat. Do you remember the ivory silk petticoat? It was so slippery Beryl ended up sewing it for me, because I didn't want to ruin it. The hawker gave me the silk especially for you. He said he saw the hunger in your eyes – an odd thing to say, wasn't it?' she said, not really speaking to me.

My mother continued her reminiscences, travelling back in time, caught up in her own nostalgia.

'By the time you were one I was nearly ready to have May, and John took over caring for you. Life was like that.'

And I continued to sit in stillness under the old gum tree, knowing my mother wanted to finish her tale, complete her story for posterity.

'After two years, although the house was not yet finished, the money had run out, so we moved into it. Then one morning your father arrived back home with his hand wrapped in bloody bandages. The tip of his left little finger had been cut off with the saw.'

My mother grimaced in memory, 'I needed the money to finish, he'd said, and I knew he'd cut something off to get the compo payout. I thought it was his whole hand and fainted,' my mother laughed softly. 'It's the only time I've ever fainted. Thank goodness he had the sense to only cut off the top of his little finger.'

Six months later they moved into the new house with John, my baby sister, and me. Then things got really hard as the mill started to lay men off and swaggies started to roam the countryside willing to do anything, just for something to eat.

'It was hard for a lot of people, but we were fine. Your

father went every weekend to catch fish. Do you remember the “yellabellies”? And the Gypsies? And the prisoners down the back with the pannikins?’ she asked suddenly.

‘Yes I do. And the rabbits,’ and we laughed companionably.

‘And the pepperina trees and the gerberas,’ and I nodded towards the flowers that had started all this.

‘Yes, the gerberas. Your father planted them for me. He boxed in the trees, carried soil on his back and planted them for me,’ and I hardened my hate, not willing to have her words soften it.

We sat in awkward silence, my thoughts beginning a life of their own as they flew here, touched there, up and down through the years.

She suddenly asked, ‘Do you remember Sugar? I gave her to you for your fifth birthday, do you remember? Well, he stole it for you. The boss at the mill was giving him a hard time so he stole it as payback. It was from a prize hen,’ and my mother smiled. ‘Do you remember?’ she asked again.

‘Yes Mum darling, I remember,’ and suddenly I didn’t want to hear any more.

My spirit was consumed with fatigue, the seesawing of emotions had produced nervous exhaustion and I wanted — no, needed — to keep my malevolence intact, there were too many things that had happened that my mother didn’t know and that I could never tell her. The domino effect that my father had caused still impacted on my life, and I was unwilling to let the hatred go.

I understood her gift, that she was entrusting her story to me. I stood and walked the few steps to this extraordinary lady, wrinkled and careworn, her white hair thinning and her skin paper-thin.

‘I love you Mum,’ and I hugged my mother as my heart filled with forgiveness at the years of hurt, the years of not understanding that the times had shaped her just as the years had shaped me. Just as the years will shape my children and their children, and I let the pain of her desertion melt like the mists that rise and vanish on an early winter’s morning.

‘Let’s go inside and have a scone and a cuppa,’ I said smiling, and kissed her withered cheek.

Life was different in those bygone days — of dunnies out the back, of travelling Gypsies, when having shoes was a luxury, where a young girl lived in a drain.

Or is our twenty-first century society so different after all? There are very few dunnies out the back now, and fewer Gypsies, but we have come full circle, and extreme poverty is not so unusual. My mother was living in her drainpipe in 1930 at the height of the Great Depression, and today in 2007 drainpipes are still called home by some of our fellow Australians.

There are also children, and women and men of all ages who go to sleep at night with empty bellies. There are young people — idle and with nowhere to work — who have lost hope in a country where the milk has gone sour and honey has long since drained away into the dust of the earth.

The honest basic jobs once available, like street sweepers, factory workers, ticket collectors and railway station porters, have all but disappeared in the society we call 'advanced'.

We can blame governments, no matter which persuasion, for this short-sighted 'advancement into the game of technology'. Luckily, there are those among us who do reach out with hands of compassion, and we should thank God for their mercies.

The volunteers in our society are the glue of this country that we call home. Hospitals, schools, Meals on Wheels, churches, Lifeline, The Smith Family — they all use carers, many unpaid and often unappreciated.

And for those among us who haven't yet reached out, do so today. There are those who do give freely of their wealth and again we should thank God for them. But the very fact that there are still many who live in dreadful poverty, who live in parks or on the streets should tell everyone that there is still much to do.

A kind word can be a gift beyond measure and when you begin to open your eyes you will see the needs. They are all around us. For the Christians who tithe the ten per cent — keep it and do some real good with it. Find a struggling family and in God's name give them the tithe and feel the real love of Christ. And in His Name, go with God.

And now, this is my story.