

Childhood Memories

When you select a memory – of Christmas morning 1956 for example – presenting it to yourself with the switch held on, others appear, sparked automatically. Obsolete patterns, flickering to life, illumine a darkened landscape to show back there, where you came from. People appear, some dead, all changed, but as they were they tell who you once were.

In this way I remember that Christmas in my childhood long ago. Holding down the switch, unflinching, I can relive, uncertainly, and in moments that spin off on retrieval, the inside story of that day.

In childhood the knowledge of Christmas coming loomed above other days at the end of the year, bristling with lights. How accepting of it was the boy of ten years' dreaming, looking towards Camelot. And when it arrived, that particular Christmas, we children went as usual with Father in the car, while Mum stayed home to cook the Christmas chicken. Alive with presents on the special morning of Christ's nativity, we alighted scintillating in the bright sunshine at the end of that famous journey. We paid our ritual visit to a family benefactor, Mr Bruce and his farm. Dogs barked, and envelopes concealing pound notes were ours. Mrs Bruce stood moist eyed. Father collected a billy of fresh milk because the shops were closed. A cardboard box of vegetables was specially pressed upon us.

On the way home, still early in the day I remember, my father spoke unusually of his own past. He too said 'I remember.' He recited, 'I remember the house where I was born, the little window where the sun came creeping in at morn ...' And so I pictured it then, and still do, Father's home as we went home, with its little window taking him by surprise. He spoke also of his mother, with reverence meaning she had suffered or worked hard. We could be near to Dad on that rare day, but only through his words. I suppose now he was shy of his children, or affected by the War. I remember his colourless eyebrows, bushy but almost invisible, and that his freckled skin, coarser than Mum's, was untouchable. He lived for us only by his presence that day, by his participation in the Christmas proceedings, by his appropriate speech, enclosed in his invisible fuzz of untouchability. No hugs from Dad. He was driving the car. But he stopped so we could see a dead wombat, still warm, on its side in the dusty grass. He seemed to know about the truck that had hit it, and how these things were. He told us he had once seen a Tasmanian tiger, in the old days, hung by its tail on a neighbor's fence.

By dinner at midday we may have been tired by so much specialness, but determined to have it all. Paper ropes of twisted red and green looped across the ceiling, hung with paper bells. The knives and forks came from the blue tissue-lined boxes in the middle drawer. Mum put out bowls of nuts and raisins for just us, and we ate them as we should on Christmas Day. By afternoon we really were tired going to Gran and Granddad's, but all the important people, the relatives, were there.

I do not know where Dad went then. I suppose he was talking to Uncle Dan, drinking beer. We played with a cousin in a double-breasted suit. He had bony hands and his dark eyebrows met in the middle. We climbed all over him, Mum said she was sorry, but he did not mind. He could grip our wrists so tightly we could not prise up even one of his big fingers. But I do not know where Dad was. I think now he did not like big family occasions. I recall only his absence that afternoon, not where he went. I suppose he talked to Uncle Dan about his car and missed the speech, and grown-up's jokes, and all the children opening more presents from aunts and uncles.

And some memories are just not there. Going home again, going to bed, the end of Christmas Day, are all lost to me now. Father bringing us home, seeing us off to bed, making it in the end like the beginning of Christmas Day, I cannot recall. I suppose he found some things difficult with us. Years later, when he died, it was not actually the dying I regretted.

When you select a memory, with the switch held down, you wait for regrets as well as other memories that will come. We had our father for such brief instalments, and then he was not there, telling us about Australia. But Christmas 1956 looms large in my boyhood, bristling with lights, and that is who I am.

They came from Surges Bay. A ratatat of plovers sharpened the distant air. They brought their old house with them. How? I did not see. But round the enclosed verandah the panes of stained glass glistened. They brought their dog, Nipper, later shot out rabbiting with the men. They came from down the Huon, where Bruni Island shields the rocky inlets from the vastness of Storm Bay.

We loved one another as children do. You can forget as adults, but we will never, ever forget – or not until we die. We will never forget not knowing we would die, hearing the talk of Surges Bay under the flapping clothes line propped against the wind. There was Michael and his wicked sister, Ann. Later she would stick her bare backside out the window for a dare. Wicked, though older than us, whenever she had done things wrong she said we did it. She told those sort of fibs, and yet I liked her best. Where was she ever when Michael and I were playing? Yet I remember her best. He waited for me so gently, I think now, but Ann had the clever face and the ringlets of black hair.

‘Would you like me to sit on a prickle?’ And she did! Sat down on a flat prickle out in the paddock, without a care.

‘D’you think I’d do it again?’ I do not remember that, but I remember a nest in the long grass, and hiding there when the bull was with the cows.

Their father had a whip, so it was dangerous to do things wrong. ‘Dad’s got the whip out!’ Ann crowed when we came back one day, guilty of lighting fires down the creek. Their mother got her headaches, went to bed and read her Rock Hudson magazines. Their nanna came out from town and kissed us all, and wheezed.

They never went back to Surges Bay, but I went once and wondered why that had left – or been there in the first place. They never had visitors from there. They had shifted. Left it behind. Yet as children we spoke about it with the importance due to the place they had first known. The name carried the weight I might give now to Africa or to Spain – the name of Surges Bay. From pieces of such stuff we made up the imagined world, and what was there ever there but a cluster of weathered houses and a prospect of the sea?

First I will describe the toy watering can: I do not remember it shiny and new with bright red paint, part of a children’s gardening set with child-size rake and hoe to match. I remember it lying old and dented in the garden, in the moist earth under the mint bushes, part silver metal, where the paint had been rubbed off, and part the flakey dull red of old paint. When the kittens came we found one with its head stuck inside it, as far as we could tell. We thought it was funny. We thought the stuck kitten would die, walking backwards, banging the can on the concrete path, its mewing muffled but persistent. The others mewed sharply, but just as persistently, for their mother. We pulled on the little warm body of the trapped kitten and out came a tousled head, different from the rest. Her face was flat, her eyes blue and her black fur wildly fluffy.

We knew at once she was special. ‘She’s a Persian cat,’ my sister said. I had never heard of such a thing but I could see she was different. Maybe that is when she became mine.

We were not allowed to keep them all. Only two. Mum was quite firm about that, and we kept the black Persian cat, of course, and another black one with smooth fur. We had other cats already. Many lived under our house, some tame and some that streaked off as soon as you approached them. Mum threw scraps to them. We all threw scraps to them. Our new kittens blended in. I stroked my Persian beauty a lot, making her purr, and my sister stroked her brother. The four of us played together sometimes, but not all the time. We did many things in those days. Sometimes I was cruel to mine. Once, when she had grown a bit bigger, I tried to stick the point of a pencil up her bottom and she wailed and scratched me. I do not know why I did that. Mostly I was so kind to her. I bought her a tin of sardines and she purred and purred.

Slowly our kittens grew into cats as the long days of our childhood passed. Mine kept her flat face and blue eyes and her black fluffy coat. When the smooth one died she developed a grey ruff round her neck for a time. 'She misses him that much,' Mum said, and I saw how it might be for her. She taught us grief.

Sometime later, perhaps when I was eight or nine, I began to take her to bed with me each night. I am surprised now that I was allowed to do that. I lay in bed in a special way to accommodate her. There was a place for her between my knees and my tummy and under my arm, and I kept my bed-clothes slightly open so she could get fresh air. I still lie like that when I turn over to go to sleep, with my knees drawn up. She came to look forward to my bedtime, rubbing around my legs and purring to tell me it was time.

But I have not told you the most important thing: she was the mother of countless kittens. I cannot remember when she first started having them. With newborn kittens she purred more loudly than at any other time, licking and licking their little bobbing heads. Once we saw her having them: we saw her with two in her cardboard nest, then three, then four. I did not actually see them come out from inside her, but I knew that was what was happening. She taught us birth.

With time and many litters she got bored with having them. She treated her later offspring a bit roughly, I thought. I could see how she felt. There is just so much fun to be had out of having kittens, and then it is a bit the same as before.

Still she went on having them. What a wonderful cat. She was still there when eventually I left home. Even now I cannot believe she ever died. I never saw it. No-one ever said she had died. So she lives on, still there where we grew up, there where we will one day return.