

*I would wish for you, friend,
A different way than mine was:
Courage will not lose the day
And who knows, you may survive.*

Máirtín Ó Direáin, from 'Achasán'

PREFACE

When I jerked the curtain down on the final scene of *Something for the Birds*, in the year of 1960, Fraser McDonald and Jacqueline Fahey had been married for five years. For most of that time Fraser had been afflicted with tuberculosis. We were living at Porirua Hospital in an old farmhouse with a lovely garden. Mr Quickly, the gardener, held sway there.

Then two things changed everything: Fraser had an operation on his chest to remove extensive scar tissue, and we had a baby. Both happenings were a success. That was when I brought the curtain down to obliterate the future.

The curtain came down on that final scene in the traditional manner of romance writing. The assumption is that once you have hooked up with your life partner, having been reunited of course after many traumas, you then proceed to live happily ever after. And that's why romantic writers draw the veil over 'what comes next'. They don't want to go there. They don't want to acknowledge the political realities of marriage with its built-in potential to damage the protagonists. That would tarnish the earlier conviction that the lovers were fighting bad forces trying to separate them.

As we know, those evil forces can lurk in any marriage, but they wear masks; we can't recognise them. From the beginning Fraser and I were already being coerced into the role-playing which society demands of the institution of marriage. This was a conflict that we were not aware went with this territory.

In 1960 we left for Melbourne, where Fraser took up a grant to study psychiatry, supposedly for two years. Over the first years

of our marriage, when Fraser was in and out of hospital with TB, we had had plenty of time to get to know each other, and for contemplation. Our reading and talking at that time formed our mentality into the future. Our viewpoint as outsiders changed our attitude towards the power structures we had been part of. We were perceived for the first six years of our marriage as failures, dropouts. Even after his operation, the idea persisted that Fraser's health would continue to be uncertain. That he was not a serious contender in the medical world. It was an invaluable experience, Fraser's sickness.

Recently I exhibited paintings that examine how it is not possible for the person I am now to pass judgement on the young woman I was in the 1950s. I am a result of that young woman, but have developed into a very different person. The first painting of this series depicts me peering down through the years, attempting to ask my young self, 'Why?'

But she is busy kicking up her legs and enjoying a gin. She yells back, 'Don't ask, don't ask, don't ask.'

Her yells grow quieter and quieter until I can hardly hear them from where I am now.

CHAPTER ONE

Now and Then

I woke entangled with a toaster. I had been dreaming about toasting a piece of bread that was deep gold on one side but pale on the other. I wanted it an even tone all over. My new toaster can't do that because the bread stands on a slant. Irritating. However, I woke up slowly and easily, thinking about the dream. The toaster is anxiety; getting the colour of the toast just right is all about perfection, the finish. A straightforward dream: the language of my unconscious was graphic, practical and satisfying. In fact, it was satisfying having a dream so easily read. Some of my dreams make absolutely no sense whatsoever. For instance, making crazy love to some guy I am definitely not attracted to in real life. No way could a dream make me think I was.

Usually it's the car dreams that stick around to be recalled in gloomy detail. In these, I am driving up a steep hill, the car keeps stalling and slipping backwards. I brake and start again, desperate and sweating. I turn to find Fraser sitting in the passenger seat beside me. I feel an intense relief and say, 'Fraser! You're not dead. That's wonderful. Do you want to drive?'

'No, I don't!' He is most emphatic. 'I may not be dead but I am still dying.'

The dream muddles on but that's the guts of it. There is nothing to be gained brooding on the details. It simply means you can never go back. There is no one to get the car up that hill except myself. This was true during the six years that Fraser was dying. So why do I have to go over it again?

Sink or swim. Don't look down. Don't look back.

Something for the Birds finishes as I am beginning my thirties. The idea for this book is that I continue from where I left off. So what am I doing starting at the end? Well, Fraser's death wasn't exactly the end, but it was the end of something all right. And it came near the end, anyway, of my bizarre sojourn on an even more bizarre earth. This is where I am now.

I had not been aware until just this year that I was near the end. Somehow I had not noticed that I had grown old. My body, after all, has not changed: hips, back, arms and legs still work; I have no debilitating illness. The brain? Well, it has always functioned pretty erratically and I can't say I have noticed any difference. What I do notice is a difference in people's attitudes. Suddenly, I need helping across the street, concern is expressed about my driving myself home. People ask what I think it is like to die, or to be dying. They wonder if I am still painting or writing.

What can these questions mean? Have I suddenly aged? I examine photographs of myself from a few years ago. Maybe photographers in the past didn't take flattering pictures, but if anything the more recent photos make me look younger than the older ones.

Why am I going on about all this stuff related to old age? I am establishing my viewpoint. This is the position whence I am looking back down into the past. Way back to Porirua

Hospital and a handsome young Fraser McDonald, the living embodiment of Doctor Kildare, that hero of 1950s soap opera, recast in New Zealand.

If Fraser was Doctor Kildare, who was I supposed to be? As portrayed in those soap operas, being the wife of Doctor Kildare was fraught with danger. Fictional doctor's wives, even today, do not fare very well. They take to booze, end up in wheelchairs or die of some mysterious tragic disease. Would that be my fate?

In postwar New Zealand, priests had not as yet been completely defrocked but the process had started. The new priests, elected by popular consent, were the young doctors emerging from medical schools. They were chosen from the brightest in the land and for them there were glittering prizes. Well, this is how it was for the meantime. And I had married into this new religion.

So what did we believe when we headed off to Melbourne for Fraser's postgraduate in psychiatry? What hopes buoyed us, leading us to uproot our two babies from the comforts of home? Alex was barely a month old and Augusta twenty months older. What propelled us overseas? I think I can tell you. We dreamt of New Zealand as the university of the Pacific, a socialist centre of creativity and justice for all. We shared this dream with Lou Johnson, James K. Baxter, Keith Sinclair and a whole lot of other hopeful people. People who were writing poems, protecting unions, reading the Russian poets. We were both very aware that we needed further experience in our different fields. That we couldn't achieve much if we didn't find out more and that we were as yet not equipped to cope with the sort of life we wished to live.

At last, because of Fraser's scholarship, we had an opportunity to travel. New Zealanders are the most travelled people in the world. We were educated to understand that we were isolated

at the bottom of the world and the centres of that world were way up at the top somewhere. We had as yet not conceived of ourselves as the centre of a new way of perceiving the world. The centre of the Pacific Basin. Going to Australia was progress in our search for enlightenment.

When it came to what humans were about we looked on the bright side; we thought with good food and an intelligent education, all children could grow up enlightened and happy individuals. Like George Bernard Shaw and all those Fabians, we denied inherent evil in ourselves as we denied evil in humanity as a whole.

Am I still denying things? My protesting about being old could sound like bravado, denial, as though ageing is going to happen to everybody else but not to me. Am I attempting to forestall for as long as possible the humiliations and shame which come from living too long? Or am I denying old age just as I denied evil in the hearts of humans? I have, it would seem, survived on denying stuff. But come, surely that's a healthier, better reaction than accepting the script that society hands us.

But where was I? Ah! Here are Fraser and I arriving in Melbourne with two small children and one corgi, Olga.

The hospital Fraser was studying at was called Mont Park and it was in fact a large park. We lived in what looked like a new state house of the type you'd find in Porirua. It sat on a small section of, depending on the season, wet or dry mud. We arrived in December and Christmas day was cold; we actually had a fire blazing in the living room. I suffered from that ghastly affliction of my boarding school days, homesickness. The taste of the water was chemical, the fish disgusting, the mateship bogus. Fraser was, however, happy. He was Hope Scott's golden-haired boy and Hope Scott was really something.

After the war, with the Labour Party in power, England had opened up its education system. Elite schools like Eton and Harrow provided scholarships for working-class boys. And a large number of these high achievers went into medicine. It was not surprising they were attracted to psychiatry, in particular to the analytical and therapeutic sides of the discipline.

However, scholarship boys like Hope Scott found they were blocked from Harley Street after graduation. Those appointments were for guys from the right families. Excluded from the power structure of medicine, the scholarship boys headed off to America and Australia where they wrote the new textbooks for psychiatry. Melbourne wasn't concerned about their well-born connections, just what these bright young men had to impart to their students. England's loss was Australia's gain and Fraser McDonald's too. In Melbourne, Fraser had access to the brightest in his field.

At Mont Park Mental Hospital, Hope Scott reigned as the resident wizard of psychoanalysis. He was the keeper of ancient magic spells and of the secrets of the black arts. Anyone who aspired to be his apprentice had to jettison his ego and journey along perilous paths of thought, paths with no signposts.

Hope Scott was tall and thin with the features of that legendary Irish god who looks both ways. His face inspired unease, and I think this was because you could never decide whether he was an old-looking young man or a young-looking old man. Unlike the other clever chaps out of Oxford and Cambridge, Hope Scott actually did fight in the war. This experience had given him such an air of cynicism, a world-weary gloom that was occasionally illuminated by a sincere curiosity about people. He seemed so alive and intelligent during these inspired moments, as if he was reverting to a more hopeful self from the past.