

**AND
THEN
LIKE
MY
DREAMS**

{ a m e m o i r }

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FREMANTLE PRESS

I dreamed of him last night, as I do all too seldom.

We were ... who knows where? – I never seem to recognise dream locations.

I put my arms around his neck and asked him please not to die before me.

There was a moment, then he smiled; and made a little gesture that encircled us.

He said, 'Isn't it good?'

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ALL OF IT

I dwelt in interior darkness, when I was thirty-one. I lived inside my head without any idea of what was happening to me, fear my only companion.

And then there was light.

Out of nowhere, as if by magic, when I was as low as I had ever been or thought it possible to be, someone came to save me. He offered me unconditional and non-judgemental love, and hoped only for the same from me.

The best part was that I was saving him, too.

It was 1 *anno Carli*, and the world began.

§

Another thirty-one years passed before the light failed.

Very late one terrible night I stood beside the one who had saved me, he who was everything I had ever wanted or needed, my hand resting helplessly on his shoulder as he lay on a wheeled stretcher in a little room off a corridor near Emergency. They had just released him from there, and his back was propped high so that he could breathe.

A few tears drifted slowly down one of his cheeks; and what little measure I had of ability to process thought started to eke away, even as did his tears.

I had no comprehension of how we had got to this: where had my husband gone? – who was this person undergoing such dreadful suffering...?

I was unable to speak to him.

He had so little time left; and I stood there, unable to speak to the man with whom I had stormed heaven.

All I knew was that half my life had been bound to this joy, and it was about to fly away forever.

A gossamer thread of sanity touched me, the contact brief. I bent and kissed his head.

BACKLIGHT AND FILL

One April day in Melbourne, a bit before the world began, my second-eldest sister summoned me. She knew I was on studio duty that week and not out on film crew, so she phoned me at work and – well, yes, summoned me*. As I was then flatting in South Yarra and she and her husband living in their Warrandyte (semi-)rural idyll, it seemed a bit strange, for these two suburbs are at more than a little distance. But I, with an awful lot of stuff going on in my head, didn't dwell on the strangeness once having remarked it to myself: I merely took a couple of trains and a bus and puffed up the hill, arriving just in time, I hoped very much, for dinner.

No dinner.

Jo wanted to let me know, face-to-face, that on that same ordinary workday morning, over in Perth where we were born, our father had laid his head gently on his desk-blotter and given up the struggle.

He was sixty-four.

There was a long history of cardiovascular problems: no one could be surprised. Our mother had nursed him during the previous ten years, on and off; and I later learned that last rites had been performed on him more than once.

He had been the axis of my unstable world, as my sister, the person to whom I was closest and whom I loved only second-most to Dadda, understood very well. But there wasn't much she could do for me, for her heart, too, was broken. She had a husband and new baby to look after and, being unable to afford herself the luxury of deep grief, couldn't share mine in other than thought.

The sun was setting as my brother-in-law drove me all the way back to South Yarra; and by the time I trudged wretchedly into my flat, darkness surrounded me.

Home had ceased to exist.

§

* if you have an older sister, you'll know how this goes ...

Father's genes had manufactured nothing but X chromosomes, and our extremely clever but emotionally incompatible parents produced nothing but daughters. I was the fourth of five, and for nine years the baby. When the last arrived there was maternal suspicion that she had stolen the wind of 'the littlest' from my sails, but such was far from the case: I adored the beautiful little creature – everyone did.

My mother didn't like me very much, her dislike springing from the unacceptable fact that I was fat. I was the only one to carry excess poundage: the other four were, as well as clever and good-looking, without physical failing. My 'avoirdupois', as it came to be referred to in pseudo-tactful family fashion, varied between regimens: I launched myself or was thrust by Mama upon many, with unflinching success – until I stopped dieting, when every lost ounce would almost instantly reappear and rush to reclaim its old familiar spot, bringing along a few friends.

It seems that from the time I was put into a highchair for my meals I displayed an impressive ability to put away food; and keeping track of the top end of my range developed into a family amusement. In fact, my appetite was often presented as an act when there were other people eating with us:

Last time Mummy made *galuptzi* Margie
Rose ate five! – she might eat SIX
tonight!

I revelled in the attention, and it provided me with an ongoing excuse for being a greedy little girl: Mama served up her amazing meals and I put them away with encouragement and gusto.

I can say with absolute honesty that in my earliest gormandising years I don't remember anyone telling me not to make a pig of myself. That was saved until I was old enough for the avoirdupois to have settled itself with a grateful sigh into all nooks and crannies, creating general convexity – when attempts to be rid of it became very hard yakka indeed. By then cuteness had faded and my hair had

stopped being a mass of curls; and it was generally agreed that for me to be fat was not *normal* – for such was the general view, back then.

INT.

BACK BEDROOM

WINTER'S DAY

Mother is stuffing number four daughter, who is finishing off an apple, into her overcoat.

A button flies off.

Reality bites.

MAMA

(frustrated; infuriated)

Just...LOOK AT yourself!

I'm ashamed to have to be seen on the street with you!

Yes, I do have a memory like an elephant. For some things.

§

I don't mean to paint a picture of a miserable childhood: in fact it was a time of fierce family loyalty. Self-identification was as part of my family, and I was intolerant of those who didn't match the cleverness with which I was habitually surrounded. There was no deliberation on the part of our parents to set up this situation (at least, I don't believe so); but we grew up without mixing with others – except for the family who, by a quirk of fate, lived next-door: being equally intelligent and well-educated, they were totally acceptable.

My family was a kind of closed shop, into association with which only those of a certain level of intellectual capacity were admitted. We children had our school friends, of course; but our parents never socialised with theirs, and we assumed that was how all families operated.

I suspect that, really, my parents' only true common ground was their enormous intelligence; and because of it they put too much emphasis on their children's.

It's from within this very small circle that come all my memories from childhood. There are flashes, for instance, of us kids putting on concerts, for which we erected a kind of curtain across one end of the lounge room: I would stand in front of it and sing, vamping to fill for as long as was required while sisters changed costumes, props, etc., then emerged to perform.

All my childhood joy, I realise now, belongs to that period when I was young enough for my size not to matter.

I was truly happy as a little girl; when those I loved would brush my hair and kiss me.

§

Years later, old enough to understand the baggage that came with being fat, I found I could cloak my shame through force of personality.

My beloved father was one (unwitting) source of this, furnishing me with a lifelong covert: he made me understand that the whole world comprises merely multiples of one person; that it doesn't matter by how many others one is faced, because the sum total is actually just one individual replicated by <X> – *for everyone can only think inside his or her own head*. That's a powerful thing to pass on to a kid, and it became my bulwark against society. However, his intention in giving me this precious knowledge had nothing to do with protecting a vulnerable child, but merely with coaching a daughter about to lead a school debating team. I doubt he was even aware of the vulnerability: my girth had no significance for him. He did call me 'Fatty' occasionally, but so did everyone in the household, for my sisters had labelled me thus in my very early years, with no cruelty intended or felt: it was my identity.

But my mother's declared dislike of my outward

appearance must have made me resentful, I suppose; and eventually I started to counter the didactically-pronounced opinions she was in the habit of uttering, thus breaking the unspoken family rule of going along with her for the sake of peace. I have no idea of the source from which I derived the strength to do this, and it didn't come about until my mid-teens; but at some point I found that smiling and nodding, and then rolling my eyes when her back was turned, just wasn't enough for me. I took to the barricades. So it's probably understandable that she felt as she did: she must have seen me as not only fat and therefore unattractive, but also disagreeable and argumentative. I don't know if my mother ever considered the possibility that my being fat had made me who I was.

Her interpretation of the maternal rôle was to give us every material thing we needed – often at cost to her own ease or leisure – and I will readily admit she never stinted. She was a *cordons bleu* cook; a top-class dressmaker, who made most of our clothes; she cut our hair; she came up with everything we needed for our many and diverse school activities; she dragged us off to the family doctor to have our little arms jabbed with preventative needles for everything she read or heard about – oh, there are far too many things she did for us for me to remember them all! She went back to work in her middle years: with a University of Western Australia arts honours degree and a Dip. Ed. from her youth, she was a brilliant linguist and had mastery over several European modern and ancient tongues. She was awarded the *Ordre des Palmes Académiques* by the French government for services to that country's language*. She later taught it at our school: I studied under her for my last two years, and my much younger sister throughout her education, and she was a very good teacher indeed. My mother was without a doubt the cleverest and most able woman I have ever known.

But I had to find out about puberty by writing to someone

* she mostly *thought* in French!

without a name, a so-called nurse at a pharmaceutical company, whose address I found on the side of an empty tampon packet discarded by one of my older sisters. And I wasn't provided at home with a single 'fact of life'.

§

Father, during his leisure hours, was wont to swan about amongst his women – wife, daughters and always a live-in maid – being doted on and scattering the largesse of his formidable wit and charm. Not long after the youngest had become one of the company his audience shrank; for the eldest left to study how to become holy, the second-eldest to teach others how to study, and the third to study how to be married – the rates of success varying. After these departures, Dadda had only me and my little sister for audience, and I suspect the radical change in statistics was hard for him.

The first four of his children adored him (further on in time, the youngest was left on her own, at twelve, to be raised by parents then middle-aged – a whole different ball game, and one that drew her closer to our mother), so I don't know that I can say I loved him most. I liked to think I did. Many years later I decided that his favourite had been my sister Carole, the next one up from me, with whom I shared a bedroom until I was – oh, something like fourteen, I think. She was 'a problem' for most of her short life; and I wondered if he had perhaps filled that rôle in his own family. I don't believe any of us was ever told about his childhood, so that's only surmise.

It was I alone, however, who shared something with him: a particular – I can't think of the right word ... failing? weakness? Whatever it was, he discovered it and understood, doing his best to help me without exposing me to the common gaze (for I think I held up to my father an imperfect mirror). This can only be explained by relating a small anecdote from a period somewhere before my puberty.

The family was on the point of going out to dine at a local hotel – a most unusual event in the context of Mother’s brilliant cooking. There’s nothing in my memory about why we were going to do this; I know only that matching the strangeness of the imminent outing was what was happening to me – for I was feeling *really* weird.

INT.	LOUNGEROOM	DAY
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The child sits on the floor, her back against one end of the big old couch, clutching her knees.

Those family members present are hooling about in normal chaotic fashion, with no one paying her any attention.

She is wondering if, when her head falls off, it will roll as far as the china cabinet...

Suddenly her father is beside her, one hand reaching down to her. She’s *compos mentis* enough to realise that he wants to give her something.

FATHER

(softly, out of the side of his mouth)

Take this...

and when the brief transfer is effected she finds she has a tablet in her sweating palm.

She gets instantly to her feet and leaves the room.

I went to the kitchen, got a glass of water and swallowed the pill; and within quite a short time I felt perfectly normal again, all strangeness gone. No other family member had noticed anything.

Whatever that pill was, it must have been his own lifeline to the world, and he threw it to me.

HERE COMES THE SUN

INT.

PERTH PRODUCTION OFFICE

DAY

WIDE SHOT: various members of a film crew, lounging about a big table waiting for a pre-production meeting and looking like an assortment of extras from Central Casting. A calendar somewhere shows it to be late 1974.

CUT TO: a door opening. She arrives.

She's a local resident, sort of; whereas, with the exception of the Camera Assistant, they have all come from Sydney.

She looks at them.

They look at her.

I hadn't, prior to that moment, come across a more varied collection of headgear, facial hair, t-shirts and footwear – not in all my days. Mind you, my own presentation was not a lot different, now I come to think of it: a floor-length kaftan was about my normal gear, back then. But I'm pretty sure I was wearing shoes of some kind – at least sandals, surely?! – for the meeting.

(cont'd)

M.R.

(nervous as always when amongst strangers, but hiding it)

Is one of you Pat Clayton?

ATTRACTIVE BEARDED MAN

(in a beautiful, deep voice)

He hasn't turned up yet.

But here's his name on a stand: we could start the meeting with that...

He positions the little object carefully at the head of the table and adopts an attitude of rapt attention—immediately aped with glee by the rest of the crew.

In fact, we all had to wait a bit for Pat the Production Manager; and I can't remember if I spent any more of that time talking to this delightful man who'd made everyone laugh. But I do know that by the time the meeting was underway, I'd ascertained he was Stills Photographer, Charles Stringer, and he was called Chic (but I had no idea what a stills photographer did on a film crew!).

He was very funny; and, as well, he was kind, helpful and astonishingly knowledgeable about—well, everything. Within a couple of days I'd found him unable to be stumped on anything I could come up with; but he never, ever pretended to knowledge if he didn't have it.

He really was *awfully* attractive ...

I was there as Continuity, of course; inexperienced on a full-sized feature film crew but raring to get up to speed. It was a stressful job, and my neuroses didn't furnish me with the most relevant background, but Chic stopped me from biting my nails within three days.

INT.	FILMING LOCATION	DAY
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C.S.

(amused)

Do you have any idea how revolting that habit is?

M.R.

(whipping fingers from mouth)

What habit?!

We were both smokers then, and he would buy my cigarettes without any request from me when he bought his packet of Drum (I was to quit in another couple of years, but he not till he was close to fifty). I remember being overwhelmed by his kindness, but I did nothing more than thank him: a man's being kind as well as funny was not within my sphere, and I wasn't sure how to handle it.

He helped me with my job. He'd been in the industry for a fairly short time, though he was already a top stillsman, having worked on several features; and he'd noted with great interest many of the duties of Continuity. The rest of the crew gave me help too, but often with some irritation that it was needed: Chic gave me ready answers when he could, and used logic when he couldn't, and didn't mock me. And he made me laugh OFTEN – sometimes after the event, as well ...



he taught me how to do this, later!

It took me a matter of days to recognise that my prime motivation had become to get into his pants. He met *all* my criteria: how was this possible?!

Of course he was married: no way a man like that could've escaped the bonds or would have wanted to. But he showed none of the usual signs – the self-satisfaction, the preening, the air of mutual complicity – by which I, the expert, could so easily identify the adventuring married man of the '70s. Thus I felt momentary qualms, even after a crew member who knew him had told me that his marriage seemed one of habit rather than of enjoyment; but they were singularly transient, those qualms. Having weighed up the matter, I opted for putting in whatever hard yards might be required.

None were: by the second week of filming we had become, as used to be said, an item.

INT.	CREW HOTEL	EARLY
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WIDE SHOT: assembly of unshaven men and snaggle-haired women, of assorted ages and all looking as if they haven't had enough sleep; for such is-or was then, anyway-the way with film crews.

They are sitting about in attitudes of less than total attention, but are in fact heeding the words of the First-he is shaven-who addresses them while eating a bun and perusing a schedule (chances are he can pat his head and rub his tummy at the same time).

He has lowered his paperwork to survey them over the top of it, grumpily.

FIRST ASSISTANT

(perfectly clearly, although his mouth is full of bun)

OK, you lot...The location is suddenly not available for today. The bloody council has changed its bloody mind again, so Terry and I will have to find another one.

You can stand down till called.

Don't leave town.

With a snap of his jaws he demolishes the last of his bun while tossing the overtaken-by-events schedule into a nearby bin-this bloke is a natural!

C.S.

(unimpressed; to M.R.)

Wanna come and have a cuppa with me?-I bought some much better teabags than the hotel gives us.

Her bland expression would fool anyone.

M.R.

(careless)

Nice idea: I've been wondering what the crew's rooms are like...

I know me: there would've been a variety of scenarios, all equally shifty, running through my head as we wandered off in amity towards the lift.

INT.

CREW HOTEL BEDROOM

NOON

From inside looking through lacy curtains to outside world, where the day is doing what days do. PAN OFF window with SLOW TILT DOWN to bed.

C.S.

(reaching for watch on bedside table)

Whaa-?!

(looks again, disbelieving)

Give me strength!-we've been fucking for *four hours*!

It can be seen that this mysterious passage of time astonishes and delights him.

M.R.

My, how time flies!, etcetera.

She stretches in luxurious idleness.

M.R.

Well, it looks like we won't be shooting today, so...

CUT TO BLACK.
