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Geraldine

ANDREA
THOMPSON



FREMANTLE PRESS

1

Geraldine was born in an entirely different hemisphere to the one she finally settled in. Younger than her brother by a full five years, she was a last-ditch attempt on Grace Sturmer's part to have a daughter. Frank wasn't really that fussed, in fact he was dead set against the idea, but Grace wore him down, eventually. After she was born, they named her Gerald and took her home wrapped in a blue blanket.

'Guess what?' That was Geraldine's oldest brother, Harry, fresh home from his first day of school.

'What?' said Grace.

'Pink snot.'

'Go outside and play,' said Grace.

Harry disappeared into the backyard, the darkening sky streaked with grey clouds, the air not quite cold enough that he could see his breath, but getting there. The yard was small, mostly concrete, boxed in between the pebbledash back wall of the house and the slatted wooden boundary fence. Through the fence Harry could see the neighbour's patch of lawn and loamy garden beds. He was over in an instant, though the fence was taller than him, and he picked his way through the thorny rose bushes, across the overgrown grass, down the side passage, forced his way around the edge of the rickety wooden gate into the neighbour's front garden and, in a few more steps, onto the road and across into the open fields on the other side. Once the five-year-old Harry had gotten over the audacity of his escape, he lost all sense of time, so immersed was he in the outdoors.

Back on their side of the street, Grace sat down and lit a cigarette, resting an ashtray on her distended belly and leaning back to luxuriate in the smoke. Grace had settled on her method of parenting quite early in the piece, and Harry had learned to disappear soon after he'd worked out what she was

about. Geraldine could never remember if she knew these things from Harry's telling of tales or because she was always there, always watching.

One of Geraldine's earliest memories was of Grace from before Geraldine was born. Grace was sitting in a hospital room, just her on a chair, about dead centre. There was one more chair in the room, but no other furnishings. The curtains were drawn against the light that would otherwise have invaded the room's only window. The floor of the room was covered with worn, grey linoleum. The hospital was in the South Yorkshire town of Doncaster, after all. The walls were painted with dirty-cream lead paint – shiny, hard and thick. It was like they came in and slapped on another coat every time the bloodstains got too much.

Geraldine couldn't recall if Grace was sitting there voluntarily or if she was strapped to the chair. She couldn't see her closely enough. After a time, a man wearing a white coat came into the room. He had a beard and a lit cigarette. He took up a chair opposite Grace and they began talking, voices low so Geraldine couldn't hear them.

The man put out his cigarette in an ashtray that must have been on the surgical trolley next to Grace's chair. He picked up a syringe and proceeded to mainline Grace with whatever was in it. Before he had finished Grace had slumped in the chair, her head lolling to one side. The man put his hand to Grace's cheek and asked, 'Are you okay, Grace? Are you still with me?'

Grace began to rouse and as she raised her head, his hand still on her cheek, she opened her eyes and looked at the man with, what was it, love? Yes, love.

'I'm okay, thank you,' said Grace. 'Are you alright?'

Was she flirting with him? Her face was beaming.

The man lit them both a cigarette, movie-star style and, for an hour, maybe more, they sat and talked and smoked until Geraldine could almost see the nicotine dripping from the lead-lined walls of the hospital room. At this time, Geraldine was just a twist of cells, swimming around each other still wondering if they would join forces, what their potential could be. Jeez, but they loved that nicotine.

2

Geraldine pushed her way into the world on 16 May 1964. She was glad the pregnancy was over and, mostly, just wanted to sleep. She hated her father's beery breath as he leaned in close for a moment without actually touching her flesh. Then she caught a whiff of something else, the stale stench of burnt tobacco. Before she knew what existence was, where her body ended and the world began, what language was, Geraldine wanted nothing more than a cigarette.

Grace took one look at Geraldine's naked body, still streaked with blood and vernix and turned her head away once she'd ascertained that life had betrayed her again.

Mercifully, Geraldine had few memories of those first months and years of yearning, second-hand smoke and neglect. After a while, her cravings dissipated and she could observe herself and the world around her in a slightly more detached way.

'What do you want for your birthday?' asked her father, Frank, to a soon to be three-year-old Geraldine.

'I want to be a donkey,' said Geraldine.

The back room of the two-up, two-down on Bentley Road was brimming with family. Truth be told, even three people made the room feel crowded. It made Geraldine, the tiniest of tots, feel like she was holding back a tide of humanity.

'Yer what?' said Frank, a smirk already breaking across his face.

'I want to be a donkey,' repeated Geraldine, her resolve beginning to break as she read the play.

'Did you hear that?' said Frank to the room in general. 'Our Gerald wants to be a donkey.'

The adults laughed and chattered among themselves about our Gerald

and his ways while Geraldine looked at them with a puzzled frown, knowing she'd made some sort of familial fuck-up, but not understanding quite what.

'Come 'ere, Gerald,' said Grandad from his chair parked by the fire, right in front of the telly, his outstretched arms already almost close enough to touch her.

Geraldine threaded her way through the crowd of relatives and reached her grandad, whereupon he wrapped her in his arms, picked her up and plonked her on his lap. There was a moment of stillness in which Geraldine knew she'd made a mistake. She shrank into herself just as Grandad's arms tightened, and he stiffened as he said, 'Gerout o' that wi'out moving.'

It was the first time Geraldine felt truly, suffocatingly trapped, but it wouldn't be the last.

3

Frank's presence hung heavy in their home. Last wisps of smoke gilded with sunlight that came through the lace curtains in the kitchen window as he left for work early in the morning. The growing worry as dinnertime approached and the daily lottery began of would he/wouldn't he be home in time. His mood and what would it be if/when he did come home. And, for Geraldine, would he remember to bring home the tomato crisps she'd asked for at breakfast? Geraldine knew this was a risky move because to get the crisps meant Frank had to stop at the pub on the way home. This opened up a whole cascade of potential cause and effect. If Frank didn't go to the pub there would be no crisps, but there was more chance that he'd be the affable man who occasionally made them queen of puddings. If he did go to the pub, there was a greater likelihood that he would forget the crisps, no matter how much he had to drink. And, the more drinks, the less likely it was to be a queen of puddings kind of night. Worst of all was if Frank stayed out late, came home with the staggers, all filled with grandiose goodwill to all men, women and others who crossed his path. On these nights, Grace became a variable in the family science experiment. If she didn't mention a single thing – the lateness, the missing dinnerness, the pissedness yet again – everyone in the house could breathe. If she mentioned even one thing, everything blew up, and the two adults of the house would be raging for hours, cupboards and drawers slamming as clothes and possessions were strewn across rooms in preparation for one or the other, or both, leaving. On these nights the kids huddled together in Harry's bedroom.

Geraldine lay on Harry's bed, pretending to be asleep, hoping her brother couldn't see her eyelids flutter with each raised voice, crack of furniture and *flumph* of stacks of clothes landing on the floor.

Harry took her arm and said, ostensibly to himself, but mostly to Geraldine, 'If he's asleep, his arm will stay up when I let it go.'

Harry held Geraldine's arm long enough for her to consider her choices – was Harry lying or telling the truth? It was hard to tell with her older brother, who'd once almost had her believing that tadpoles tasted like chocolate. Harry let go and Geraldine kept her arm upright and stiff. There was silence for a moment, a brief respite from the battle going on in the room over the hallway and then, with the slamming of a door and heavy footsteps on the stairs, it didn't matter anymore who was wrong and who was right. Geraldine let her arm go and the siblings held their positions in silence for what felt like hours. When Grace came in to check on them, her face still streaked and puffy with tears, they were both asleep, Harry holding Geraldine in his arms, cradling her head, her face perfectly round and pink.

For Geraldine, the worst nights were when Frank came home totally smashed, got past Grace, snuck noisily up the stairs and into Geraldine's room, packet of tomato crisps in one hand, cigarette in the other, and proceeded to sit on the edge of her bed. Frank spoke to his children in a singsong voice, whether he was pissed or otherwise. Geraldine hated it.

'Geerald,' he'd say, thinking he was speaking softly and wafting his stench in eddies all around her room.

'Geeeeeerald, I've got yer crisps, son.' Then a bit shorter when she didn't stir. 'Gerald.'

Those nights Geraldine feigned sleep like an Olympic champion, rolling over and mewling like a little lost soul when Frank rested his hand on her leg. Some nights, if she was lucky, he simply fell asleep, chin resting on his neck, gently swaying in a breeze all of his own making, breath rumbling in his throat, then awoken after a few moments with a piggy snort. Geraldine worried that his burning fag would set fire to her bed and all that polyester would go up in one giant *whoof!* She imagined what the flames would be like, could feel their heat melting her flesh, smell hair burning and see bones cracked open, their marrow boiling. But still she didn't move.

After Frank left, Geraldine would eat her crisps, savouring the sweet tang of the tomato flavouring, using her saliva to melt the deep-fried, misshapen discs of potato rather than risk Frank's return with the sound of her chewing.

4

The Yorkshire market town of Beverley where the Sturmers lived was about as close to idyllic as you could get when your family had started out proper working class, consigned to the colliery and living in a mining village. Geraldine was two when her family made the move from Bentley, Frank having decided that working down't pit wasn't for him. In a way, it was a brave move, breaking away from family and generations of tradition, but it didn't stop Frank's father, uncles and male cousins from seeing him as something of a coward. For Geraldine, it meant that the freedoms she took from the increasingly exhausted and disengaged Grace were relatively safe. A four-year-old taking excursions on her own in the tightly wound streets of Bentley may not have lasted long, or even been able to find her way back home once she'd turned a corner or two. Beverley's streets were wide enough for cars to pass without pulling into the kerb and lined with front gardens scented with roses, apple blossom and hope.

Geraldine walked up and down the streets of Beverley speaking house numbers and car number plates under her breath.

'B - D - 5 - 1 - S - M - R,' she would whisper to herself, the random rhythms of the letters and numbers soothing the chatter in her mind, evening out her breathing.

Geraldine knew she wasn't meant to be here, but here she was, and if she kept her head down she knew no-one would pay her any mind. Later, Geraldine learned that this was called hiding in plain sight and, much later, that she was being mindful, staying in the moment as a means of coping with the world. How she learned to read the random numbers and letters on the car number plates up and down her street Geraldine never knew, but she soon knew which house and which people each car belonged to, and they got to know her, too.

‘Hey up, Gerald,’ said Mr Brooker from over the road and one up.

‘Alright, duck?’ asked Mr Gott, from two doors further on.

‘Shouldn’t you be home, love?’ Mrs Thompson – who lived in the last house on their street before it met a T-junction – enquired nervily.

Geraldine never answered, just kept up her whisperings and continued on her way. People said she floated like a ghost, feet hardly touching the ground.



Geraldine had her brother to thank for her graduation to books. While Harry was absent at school she would forage in his room, leafing through readers he’d either lost or forgotten to return. Starting with *John and Janet*, Geraldine was able to match her knowledge of the shapes and sounds of individual letters with the pictures and form words. As she whispered to herself, ‘See John run. See Janet run,’ Geraldine was looking as far into the background of the illustrations as she could, wanting to know what was at the other end of the meadow John and Janet were running through. Were they running for the joy of it? Or were they running away? Geraldine wanted to know their story but these primers weren’t giving it to her. She searched, tried to see over the horizon, but the pictures and text gave her no clue as to what John and Janet were really up to.

Geraldine first learned about stories when she discovered a copy of *Five Go Adventuring Again* wedged between Harry’s bed and the rather grimy wall. Observing the marks on the wall and the predicament of the book, she wondered what he got up to while he was sleeping. When she first opened the book’s pages, she felt the words rush towards her. There were books on a shelf downstairs that had only words on every single page. Geraldine had taken some of these down and handled them, turned their pages, but somehow they felt foreign, even forbidden to her. The copy of Enid Blyton’s adventure felt a bit more forgiving with its illustrations and large print.

Geraldine worked her way through the letters, forming words under her breath with increasing confidence and, rather than leaning on the illustrations, began to see the story live in her mind. She could see, smell and almost touch the action and as her whisperings gained pace, the vividness and complexity of the pictures increased until they became almost

unbearable. Geraldine had to pause for breath along the way or she felt the book would have her disappear into its world, but she read the whole thing in one sitting, moving only when she heard footfall on the stairs and realised Harry was home from school.

Five Go Adventuring Again was where Geraldine met George. It was the first time Geraldine knew something without knowing what it was. She tucked George away for later.