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*Currabin, January, 1934*

My first concert consisted of a piece by Schumann called 'The Happy Farmer'.

The audience was my parents and two of their friends visiting from the city. I was three years old, it was summer, the curtains were drawn; because of its aspect and the thickness of the walls the parlour was the one room in the house that stayed moderately cool. It also had all the good furniture in it from the English relatives. The four adults sat in a line; the lady from the city had a parasol leaning against the side of her chair, which I coveted, desperately.

I pumped out the oom-pah-pah bass, the cheery tune; sometimes the accompaniment had little off-beat rejoinders that made everyone smile. When I finished they clapped loudly, I looked up at my mother, climbed onto my father's knee; he kissed me on the cheek, wetly. Four big faces smiling down on me, they were suns, stars, moons; I orbited around them.

The visitors left and I began working on a piece called 'Andante'. My mother was sitting beside me. Again, she said, again, and I played it until I got it right. Wrists up, she said, touching them with a flat fingertip. Fingers bent. Then I played it all the way through and my mother stayed silent, there was nothing more to correct. I realised she wasn't sitting beside me anymore, she had got up and was looking out the window at the rows of orange trees. I kept my hands on the keys until only the tiniest sound was left, then nothing.

I lifted my hands, she turned her head. That was very good, she said.

It was a sad piece, and I'm not sure how I knew such sadness then. Was I sad about practising so much instead of playing with other children? Or was it sadness by proxy? Sadness for Mother, preparing to send her only child to the place she herself longed for? Or for Father, who was out on the block, going mad again?

He was up in a tree, feet and hands on branches, counting oranges. Then he was down on the ground, stalking fruit that had already fallen. He was muttering the number of the oranges he had counted in the tree, he was counting the fruit in the pile on the ground; when he added both numbers together he got ninety-three. It was a number so low in relation to what he had hoped for, and expected, that he refused to believe it.

He leapt back into the tree, poked his head in and out of the spiky branches to find more oranges; he scabbled around in the dirt at its base. He added the two numbers again; ninety-two. He was staggered. He was enraged. A bastard, sneaky orange had disappeared right in front of him. He started to shake, his legs, his arms, he pulled out his shirt, ripped off his hat.

I was lying on the scratchy couch lawn watching all this, covering my mouth with my hands to hide the giggles. In this mood, Father was scary close up but funny from far away.

I saw him eye the fruit on the next tree, consider adding some of those, but then his body countered – that just wouldn't do. He was Walter Murray, most bountiful orange producer in the district, he was a magician, and he bent over suddenly and stared at the ground. I put my hands over my ears, expecting him to shout, but he just walked further into the block, stumbling a little on the crusty edges of the furrows he and Mother had dug that morning for the irrigation.

He came back later in the truck with sacks of fertiliser. He hauled one out, fast, and ripped into it. With huge shakes he

sprayed the stuff all over himself, the trees and the ground beneath them.

My mother was furious. The fertiliser was expensive, the money was from her family, and the money had nearly run out. She scolded him when he came inside, hands on her hips, her voice rising then falling dangerously low.

I was under the table in the playroom and I saw my father rush at her as if he were about to do something terrible. My mother flinched, her shoulders tensed, she turned away. He spun around and banged out the back door.

My mother put her hands in the kitchen sink and stood there without moving for a long time. When the light dropped I went into the kitchen, put a hand to her skirt, pulled at the waistband, squirmed between her and the edge of the sink, and she took her hands out of the water with the wet still on them and held my back, and we didn't say a word.



My father became interested in manure. He told me its effectiveness had been scientifically proven, and that chicken manure was best of all. Every day he shovelled the shit out of the chook house into a bucket and sprinkled it around some trees. There were only a few chooks and not nearly enough shit for acres of recalcitrant, under-performing sneaky bastard orange trees. He watched the chooks pecking about, threw them weeds he had pulled, even crusts of bread spread with lard. Once, a cake my mother had baked.

He decided he would accept any sort of shit. Shit from cows, dogs, horses, pigs. He went around the district, sloping up people's drives, asking for shit, which might have become a running joke except that I think people were a bit scared of my father and the madness that streaked his yellow-white eyes. He didn't tell them why he needed the shit, but they usually bagged

some up and delivered it, because everyone remembered, or said they remembered, what he was like before the war.

He shovelled the shit around the trees and stood watching them like a dog watches a ball someone threw for it weeks ago.



Urine, he decided. It was very fertile-making; there was a chemical in it that made it liquid gold. Every time he needed to pee he strode onto the block, undid his pants and aimed at the base of a tree. When he asked my mother and me to do this she just looked at him. As he peed further down a row his purposeful walk turned into a hurried wiggle. He stood in front of trees trying to squeeze out more; there might have been a dribble. So many trees, so little urine. He went quiet for a while.

Then he started to look sly and walk with a swagger. He kissed my mother on the cheek with great smacks of his lips. He had a secret in his chest that he was proud of. One night I heard the rumble of an unfamiliar truck in the drive. Kneeling at the window I watched my father help a man guide a hose from its side to the irrigation furrows. Something dark chugged out and slopped onto the soil. The trees were still and silent as if reflecting philosophically on what they had been given to drink.

In the morning he didn't tell my mother that the truck was from the abattoir, carrying blood from the animals they killed and cut up. He only told me. But when she saw the blood on his boots her lips zipped up and she turned away when he tried the smacky-lip kisses again. I went near the trees tentatively, but nothing seemed to change about them, nothing at all.

Not long after this, when he thought no one was looking, my father got the axe out of the shed, walked purposefully past the woodpile and stood at the top of a row of oranges. He considered the tree in front of him. With the blade of the axe he chipped off some of the small twigs and thin branches near the bottom,

exposing the trunk. Then he gripped the axe with both hands, made his legs into two sides of a triangle, his mouth into one flat line, drew the axe back and threw the blade hard into the trunk. He wrenched it out, swung it back, plunged it in again. With even, lethal blows he chopped the tree to the ground.