



asb

In Falling Snow

MARY-ROSE MACCOLL

Paris 1917

Afterwards, she would find herself unable to describe the old man with whom they shared the elevator, other than a lascivious smile, as if he knew. She would forget the hotel lobby, the desk clerk, the room, even the view out the window which she knew must be the Luxembourg Gardens. I want . . . he said, but she stopped him with a kiss and pulled him into the room. She worked her hand through the front of his coat, shirt and undershirt to the warm smooth skin of his stomach. She felt the kick all the way up her arm.

Still locked in the kiss, he undid the buttons of her blouse, pulled up the camisole and ran his arms around her waist. This time the feeling started deep in her chest, spreading heat from there. They squirmed out of their clothes and stood there in boots, pants puddled around their ankles. He started walking forward towards the bed, she backwards, baby steps, still joined in the kiss. She tripped and he caught her in his strong arms before she fell. Together they collapsed onto the floor, laughing as they pulled off their boots. Naked now, they

embraced again. He lay on his side and drew a line with his fingers from her toes up one leg over her hips belly breast and face and down the other side. He moaned when she touched him. They made love there on the floor.

Later she got up and surveyed the room, their clothes leading from the door, his boots, the last thing to come off, at the bottom of the bed. She would remember none of those details but would never forget the long lateral muscles of his back, where angel wings would start. And the shame. She would never forget the shame.

He looked up at her and smiled and she saw momentarily in his face the face of her brother. What? he said.

Nothing, she said. You're beautiful.

Iris

The envelope was at the bottom of the small pile of mail, as if it planned the surprise. I'd already been to the shop for the newspaper and the girl, the new one, had counted my change incorrectly and I'd said so and she'd said aren't you the sharp one, which she'd never have said to a twenty-year-old. I felt like saying and aren't you the stupid one but didn't. On the way home, I'd stopped under the tree outside Suzanne's place, even though I knew they weren't likely to be home; the younger children's piano lessons are on Wednesdays and they'd have left already. I was about to keep going when I noticed, on the ground under the tree, a tiny possum, lying on its side as if sleeping. I don't know how I'd missed it on the way up. I had to take my time bending down. I looked back at Suzanne's house; definitely no one home.

The possum was breathing but its breaths were fast and shallow, as if it might not be long for this world. I dropped my satchel and walking stick, sat down on the ground beside the possum and picked it up gently. I could find no obvious

injuries, but ants were making their way over the underside of the poor little creature's face and neck, no doubt anticipating their attack once the elements had done their work. I brushed off as many as I could and took my cardigan from my satchel and wrapped the possum up. It didn't resist me, had no fight at all.

I'd seen a possum like this with its mother and twin on the wires in the early evenings lately, making the journey from Suzanne's house to the mango tree in my front yard. Ringtails not brushtails, creatures you might have as a pet if their smell wasn't so powerful. 'You should be with your mother,' I said, 'not sleeping on the footpath.' I held the possum against my chest. It nuzzled straight down into the cardigan, perhaps feeling a measure of safety with this new giant that had come into its life, or perhaps just too exhausted to care. The sun was already high in the sky, and although there was a freshening north-easterly breeze I felt it was going to be a warm day. We sat for a while, the possum and I, both of us too weak to do much else.

I was just contemplating how I might manage to stand up when I saw the young man from the grocery store on his way to work. 'Hallo!' he called out as he charged down the hill towards me. 'Are you all right, Mrs Hogan?'

'Well, clearly not, Patrick,' I said. 'I've gone and sat down and now I need to stand up. I have a possum.'

'So you do,' he said, moving closer to give me his arm. 'That's the one was there last night.'

'You saw it last night?'

'Yeah,' he said, 'on my way home from work.'

'Why didn't you pick it up?'

'It's just a possum, Mrs Hogan.' I gave him my free hand

and he fairly pulled me up – I really don't think I had much to do with it – and then held the possum for me while I put my satchel over my shoulder. 'Stinks,' he said.

I took the possum back and sent him on his way. 'I'm glad I'm not a possum or you might have left me here. Anyway, thank you, Patrick,' I said and then noticed his name badge said Mark. So nice of him not to correct me. I smiled and patted his shoulder.

'Seeya, Mrs H. Have a good one.'

Most mornings I see Geoffrey, the postman, who always has something interesting to say about the world – yesterday it was people in Sydney whose gaiety was a problem for the police in a way I couldn't understand; I'm not even sure what they were happy about because I missed the beginning of the story and then felt I was too far behind to ask – but today he must have come early. He sometimes does if his satchel is very full. The children next door on the uphill side were standing to attention at the gate in their uniforms, their mother at the top of the stairs yelling at them; nothing unusual in that household, frankly. I smiled as I passed the children and said, out of their mother's hearing, 'Is that a dragon I can hear?' They didn't respond but the older one, a boy of about ten, smiled back and craned his neck to look at what I carried. 'I'll show you later,' I said, feeling I needed to get inside and put down my load. I collected the mail and from the bottom of the stairs called to the children's mother, 'Lovely day.' She pretended not to hear. They're new to the neighbourhood.

I put the mail down to open the door and took the possum, still in my cardigan, and set it down in the umbrella box. It was breathing more easily, I thought, although it was totally incurious about its new surroundings. Exhaustion, I decided,

and exposure. Somehow it had been separated from its mother. I picked up the mail and left it on the hall table while I went to warm some milk and sugar and put on the coffee. I found an eye dropper in the bathroom and washed it out. I took the saucepan of sweet milk to the front hall and filled the dropper. At first the possum showed no interest but I persisted, pushing the dropper towards its tiny mouth until it took a first little lick and then guzzled. ‘Hungry too,’ I said. I filled a hot-water bottle and put it in the box, unwrapping the possum from my cardigan and wrapping it in an old piece of flannel. My cardigan smelt musty.

I made my coffee and went to get the mail from the hallway table. It was the usual nonsense – a bill from the electric company, a rather lovely booklet from the SPCA, a David Jones catalogue – and the envelope.

I knew where it was from, the blood-red logo in the corner, the R with its long tail, but even though I knew, it took a moment to recall the word, as if I had it tucked away in the very darkest corner of my mind and it took time to find the light switch. Miss Ivens came first, her name, and then her face, smiling, saying, as she so often did, ‘After all, Iris, we’re women. We do things.’ And then Royaumont, I thought finally, dear Royaumont, as I sat down on the floor in the hall, fell down really and found myself seated. I haven’t heard for years, not a single word, not from any of them.

The envelope had taken a circuitous route and several months to find me, posted in June from France, addressed to Miss Iris Crane, my maiden name, going first to the house at Risdon by the look of things – I don’t know how they knew where to find me – and from there to Fortitude Valley where Al and I had lived; Mr Stinson must have forwarded it from

the Valley here to Paddington. I didn't open it straight away. I'd felt a little flutter and decided it was best not to upset the apple cart. I got up from the floor slowly, using the hallway table for support.

I have a heart that worked well for more years than I care to disclose before it decided, rather suddenly, that it could work well no more. I told the heart doctor Grace took me to that at seventy beats a minute, more or less, mine had beat more than three billion times. Nothing wrong with your brain, he said, in that voice reserved for women over a certain age. Or my ears, I wanted to yell back but didn't, and at any rate, my ears are not what they used to be. When he dropped his voice to address Grace, who sat beside me, she nodded but I hardly heard a word. I've noticed that old things are popular now, furniture and houses and clothes. But not people. Old people are anything but popular, as if it's a disease we've got that others might catch rather than one they already have.

It can't just be my heart. There must be other body parts of mine biding their time, my liver, my kidneys, those organs that work on and on through the night, cleaning my blood and body, my brain that won't stop, that doesn't rest even when I plead with it. My brain and its thoughts, its monkey business, as Grace called it in her brief Buddhist period. She'd become friendly with a philosophy student when she was at the university. Dying is easy, she told me when she was all of twenty-one. You just breathe out and then you don't breathe in again. I suppose I could have found her quiet confidence impertinent but it was almost sweet that someone so far from death could pretend to understand the view from here. It's not a pretty view, but it's not as bad as you might imagine.

I have turns – that's what I call them, because it sounds

innocuous, although Grace calls them coronary-somethings, I must ask her. I'm afraid I'm beyond the age at which I might be able to remember new expressions. I live with the words I already know, except the few I manage to pick up from schoolboys on the bus. I love to surprise Grace with my new knowledge. 'I went to the city yesterday,' I might say. 'It was cool.' She finds it so unlikely I would know how to place 'cool' in the vernacular, she asks what happened, did I forget my cardigan, those gorgeous green eyes that came straight from her grandfather and into her head, that can still make me take the occasional sharp breath in when I see them flash up at me from a book or task that requires concentration, those lovely eyes that have haunted me through all her thirty-nine years and will haunt, I suppose, a little longer, until I am reunited with Grace's grandfather and I no longer need haunting.

When Al died I thought my life too would end, in every sense but breathing in and out. We were not particularly physical – whenever he'd see couples strolling across the Story Bridge with arms intertwined he'd say they must have back trouble to need to support one another – but we were so used to each other, that was the thing. He was the one constant in my life. It was his breakfast that got me out of bed in the morning, his shirts needing ironing that kept me going, his dinner that made me eat. I worried about the days, how they'd pass. In the event, it was his smell I missed most. I didn't miss the ironing and breakfast at all but I kept his unwashed pyjamas by me in the bed where I spent most of my time. It was months before I gave them up to the washing.

Lately, I've got to wondering whether when you get to Heaven you'll be the age you die or some other age, a favourite perhaps. If I'm the age I die, I'll be old and most of those I

lost will be young. If I'm given a choice, indeed if Heaven's where I'm going, I'll pick five so I can remember my mother, or twenty so my life is yet to be decided. And then I'll do it all differently. Ah, regrets. Where do they take us? Not here, not to happiness.

After breakfast – two wheat biscuits and a cup of black tea instead of the coffee I'd made – I felt a little better. I sat down on the front porch and looked at the envelope again. It's from the Fondation Royaumont that runs the abbey these days. Inside is a folded card, the edge glinting in the sun. I open it up. It's an invitation. They've asked me back. They've asked us all back because come December they're laying a plaque to commemorate our service, to recognise us, *les Dames Écossaises de Royaumont*, the Scottish Women of Royaumont. It's sixty years since the war ended, if you can believe it, and they know if they wait for a hundred none of us will be left.

Whenever I contemplate my coming death, which I can still do without anxiety – it remains theoretical even now I suppose – I know there is one task left undone. I have found myself wondering what became of Violet, whether she's living, whether she's happy. And the older I get, the more I wonder, late in my night when it's her morning. Water under the bridge, I told her once, it's all just water under the bridge. Well, it seems Violet's not only alive but able to speak, to speak on behalf of the women of Royaumont, to speak, can you believe, about what women can do. It says so on the invitation. I finger the smooth white card, the logo embossed, the tail of the R so long it trails off the page. I turn the card over, half expecting the tail to continue on the back. I put the invitation back in the envelope.