

COLLECTED STORIES

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Twelve Stories (Bearsden Press, 1966)

My mother, Margaret Hatley, was a short story writer. In the few photographs I have of her she is carrying a book, holding it against her chest as if she were suckling it. There are no photographs of my father at all, for my mother destroyed them when he left her, a month before I was born. I only knew him from the parts of him she put in her stories, a limping walk, a way of reading the newspaper at arm's length. Whilst my mother wrote, my father was made of words.

When I was a child, I loved to watch my mother writing. She would sit at her scarred wooden desk under the stained glass window in the hallway, the light from the window harlequinning the page before her. Even now I see the top third of any page in a book as green, the middle blue, and the lower third yellow. As she wrote, she would keep a cigarette burning on the ashtray at her elbow, and from time to time blow great smoky o's into the air. These cloudy zeroes would rise up and be dissipated to nothing by the ceiling fan above her head, the only one in the house. At these times I knew not to bother my mother with talk of dollies or playing dress-ups. I liked to paint, and she never minded the mess as long as I was quiet. In my childish drawings my mother had eleven fingers, one of them being the pen she always had in her hand. The morning was for writing, and the afternoon for reading. She preferred dead authors to living ones, as she wouldn't feel jealous of them. But even then, she would weigh a book in the kitchen scales before reading it. 'Any book that weighs more than a kilo is not worth reading,' she said.

I learned very early that my name, Barbara, came from the Greek word for foreigner. It was an onomatopoeic word, suggesting what the Greeks had thought of other languages. Bar-bar-bar. My mother would often shake her head and say, 'Just because you're called Barbara doesn't mean you have to talk nonsense.' It was my father who had chosen the name. Sometimes my mother would say to me, 'You look like your father,' but I never knew if she was pleased by this. I think she resented that my father had written half of me. He was killed in an industrial accident when I was six months old, and since he and my mother were not yet divorced, she received the compensation. With this money she was able to buy a five acre block (her 'Writer's Block' she called it) a half hour from Newcastle, and she built a house there, with lots of rooms and cupboards and hallways and bookshelves. There were so many places for hiding and eavesdropping, the house might have been designed to stage Shakespeare's plays.

The Writer's Block was surrounded by a high brick wall, and had a large untidy garden. Every day for half an hour before dinner the two of us would do some weeding. I would happily pull up any green thing that I saw, but my mother had some method I could never work out, taking a weed here, leaving one there. It was almost as if she were editing the garden. After dinner she would inspect my clothes to see if anything had been ripped or torn during the day. It was at these times I would stare at my mother's eyes, which were a striking blue. The only make-up she wore was heavy mascara. With her pencil, she would go over the lines again and again. Since she had refused to learn how to sew, and hated to shop, she would buy clothes for us through the post. If I needed new shoes, she would make me stand on top of some old, opened novel, then draw around my feet with a pencil. She would then cut around the tracing and send these Nabokovian or Conradian footprints off to a shop in Sydney, and my new shoes would arrive a few days later.

When it was time to go to sleep, my mother would sit beside my bed, and instead of reading 'The Three Bears' or 'Rumpelstiltskin,' she would read aloud the short story she had been working on that day, making corrections to it as she went along. In this way, I listened to the stories in her first book many times. Even when she wasn't at her desk, she was

making notes for stories. I heard from one aunt that my mother had been making notes about labour even as my head was crowning. She wrote lines for stories on cigarette packets, newspapers, in soap on the mirror, even in the labels of clothes. Then she would forget where she had written something and we would both search the house for hours, examining every scrap of paper we could find.

When I was six years old, I wrote my first and only book, and gave it to my mother. It was called *The Horses of Rainbow Valley*. It was five pages long, bound with a piece of string I had found in the garden, and full of pictures of horses and spiders and flower petals. I presented the book to my mother as she sat at her desk, and watched as she took her red pen and corrected the spelling and the punctuation. When she had finished, she returned the book to me, and I could see that she had written over almost everything. 'The structure is unsound, and the pacing is too slow,' she said. 'If you want to be a writer, you have to learn to rewrite.' I tore the book in half and started to cry.

There was one story in her collection that my mother never read to me at bedtime. It was called 'The Zebras of Cloud Valley,' and it told of a young girl cheering her sick mother by writing a book for her. Critics consider it to be one of her most moving stories, and it has often been anthologised. In interviews, my mother always strongly denied that any of her writings were autobiographical.

A Serpent's Tooth and Other Stories (Penguin, 1979)

By the time I was thirteen years old, I had come to realise I would always be a minor character in my mother's life. She had never done more than sketch me in. So I was excited to find my birth certificate one day, whilst helping her recover more of her lost notes. On the certificate, my mother's name was listed as 'Charlene Boag.' This thrilled me. I wanted to be adopted. But when I asked my mother, she just laughed and said that she was Charlene Boag. She had become her pen-name. 'Would you rather read a book by Charlene Boag or Margaret Hately?' she asked.

As a teenager, I was sick of books, sick of writing. I didn't like to bring my friends to the house because of the preoccupied way my mother looked

at them. She unconsciously measured people for a story as an undertaker might measure them for a coffin. Once, at the dinner table, when she noted down something I had just said, I shouted, 'Can't you stop writing for one minute? I'm talking, not dictating!' I was old enough by then to understand her stories, and I hated the way she had killed my father in one of them, and how she had taken the birthmark on my wrist and given it to a fictional child.

Now that I was older, I began to notice that the cigarettes my mother smoked often contained more than tobacco. When I asked her if she took drugs, she said, 'Yes, I'm researching a drugs scene, for a story.' In the mornings when I found her at her desk with two empty wine bottles on the floor at her feet, she would say, 'I'm researching alcohol.' I never introduced her to David, my first boyfriend. No men ever came to our house and when I asked her about this she said that the only men she wanted in her life were Ernest Hemingway and Frank O'Connor.

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