



GABRIELLE
CAREY

MOVING
AMONG
STRANGERS

Randolph Stow and My Family

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UQP

In Memory of Randolph (Mick) Stow (1935–2010)
and
Joan Carey née Ferguson (1922–2009)

Truly there is in the world nothing so strange, so fathomless as love. Our home is not here, it is in Heaven; our time is not now, it is eternity; we are here as shipwrecked mariners on an island, moving among strangers, darkly. Why should we love these shadows, which will be gone at the first light? It is because in exile we grieve for one another, it is because we remember the same home, it is because we remember the same father, that there is love in our island.

‡ RANDOLPH STOW *THE GIRL GREEN AS ELDERFLOWER*

{ VOICES

Ideal and loved voices
of the dead, or of those
lost to us like the dead.

Sometimes they speak to us in dreams;
sometimes the brain hears them in thought.

And, for one moment, with their sounds,
sounds come back from the first poetry of our lives –
like music at night, remote, fading away.

‡ C.P. CAVAFY

PROLOGUE

One night I dreamt I saw Randolph Stow. He was sitting in a cave, wearing a long robe, his chest bare, an ascetic, like one of the desert fathers. There was something magisterial about his aspect, and it was so compelling, magnetic.

I woke with a shock. This is too much, I thought. This is taking literary obsession too far. Clearly his grip on my mind was burrowing deep. Did I really want to be possessed in that way?

Trying to get to know a dead man you've never met and who was notoriously shy and secretive was not easy. Over the last few years I have read and re-read Randolph Stow, travelled through Stow's country, met with old friends and family – who knew Julian Randolph only as 'Mick' – and journeyed far to get to know this most enigmatic of writers. I have collected articles and essays, letters and quotations, and yet I'm still not sure I know this mysterious man any more now than at the outset of this pilgrimage. Maybe that's the way he would have wanted it. 'Ideally perhaps a writer should be totally anonymous – a voice and nothing more,' he once said. And yet, when I read Stow's work, and especially his poetry, his voice is persistently and intensely personal.

Randolph Stow was many things: hugely talented, somewhat tortured, occasionally earnest and often very funny. His books are full of the haunted and the mysterious: ghosts, second sight, telepathy, mysticism, magic, wild men from the sea, water-diviners, green children, apparitions and talking animals. He creates complete worlds of imagination that are also utterly real. And he does this with the ease of power that one imagines could only belong to some kind of sorcerer or medieval conjurer.

Amid the paraphernalia of Stow artefacts that have gathered around my desk over the years, there is one item of correspondence that proves to me, more than any other, that Randolph Stow was a magician. It is a letter written by my six-year-old niece (now twenty) after reading the large, forgotten classic of Australian children's literature, *Midnite: The Story of a Wild Colonial Boy*. The beautiful, childish handwriting is illustrated with pencil sketches of the animal characters – Red Neck, Dora, Gyp, Major and Khat, the talking, scheming, feline accomplice to the dull-witted but always likeable teenaged bushranger.

Dear Mick,

I really enjoyed reading Midnite. I think I enjoyed it because of the names of the characters and places. Do you have any children? How did you get the idea for the book? And did you get the idea of Mrs Chiffle from Grandma?

I usually ride my bike to school so just when I get to the paddock I leave it at my Grandma's house. There is a cat next door to her that keeps coming in but can't talk.

Grandma gave me the book to read.

Lots of love,

Sinead

The fact that Sinead felt she had to confirm to Stow that the cat next door to Grandma's *couldn't* talk

makes me sure that Randolph Stow was a genius. A cat that couldn't talk, thanks to the world as r
created by Stow, was clearly an exception.

Stow's postcard in return is typically idiosyncratic. Polite and gracious as always, he careful
ignores all of his young reader's queries.

Dear Sinead,

*Thank you very much for your letter and for the lovely pictures of the animals in *Midnite*. I liked the smile on the cat. I have a black and white cat who is getting a bit old now (she's 13) but is as cheeky as when she was a kitten. When the vicar came to see me she used to sink her claws into his leg, which he didn't like very much. She was a stray kitten, and she picked me up in a pub called 'The Billy', one hot night when all the doors were open, so her name is Billy. In India that means 'she-cat'.*

All good wishes to you and your Grandma.

Mick Randolph Stow

The young admirer of Stow's work receives none of the information she was seeking; she doesn't find out if the author has children or how he got the idea for *Midnite* or if Mrs Chiffle was based on his grandmother. (I too see a striking resemblance between Mrs Chiffle and my mother.)

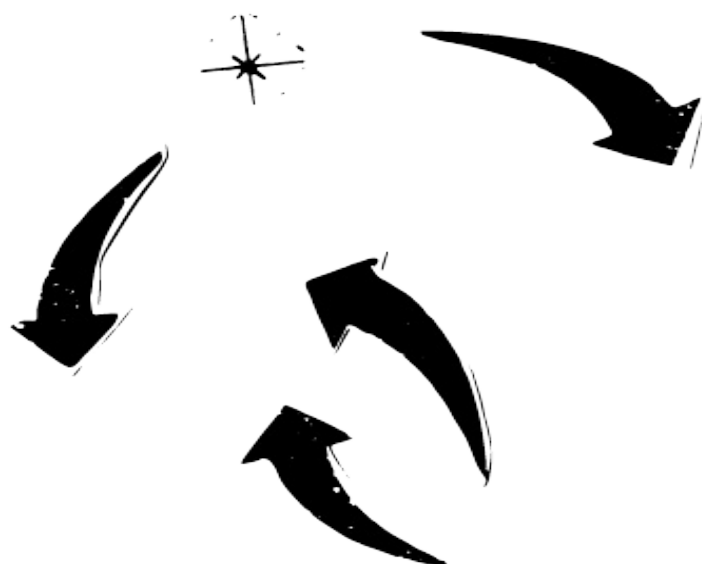
Even if I had met Stow, his responses to my own questions would probably have been similar to his responses to my niece: charming, anecdotal and polite, but nothing to do with what I actually asked. For that reason this book is not a biography. Neither is it a work of literary analysis or scholarly enquiry. It is more like a 'mostly private letter', to use Stow's phrase, written out of curiosity, and tenderness towards a man whom I have come to think of as an almost-relative, a dear friend of my mother's, and the ideal literary mentor.

While writing this book I came to believe that both my mother and Stow were content to leave their life, in part, because neither of them could cope with what the world had become. Both had grown up in a different era – of manners and customs, hand-embroidered tablecloths, thimbles and engraved serviette rings. An era that both of them eventually rejected and yet there were aspects of those days that they longed to maintain: the frugality, the quietness, the slowness, the restraint; not to mention the homemade marmalade and elderflower wine. An era with a quality that Stow described as 'a certain fineness'.

I offer this story in the hope of re-creating some sense of what we have lost from the time and place that produced this prodigy who became the writer Randolph Stow. And so others too might share his vision and his dreams.



AN
IMPERFECT
END



I can pinpoint the day my mother began to die. I say *began* because dying, I have realised, is an active thing, a verb, a doing word, and can take some time. Months even. For my mother it took exactly three weeks.

I date the beginning of her dying from the day she stopped eating. It wasn't that she didn't have an appetite, or the desire to eat. It was simply that her body, now consumed with stomach cancer, could no longer imbibe more than water or weak tea. She looked longingly at other people's food, at my egg and watercress sandwich, at the custard tart brought by friends for afternoon tea, at the bowl of green grapes that sat so temptingly on my sister's kitchen table.

The last thing she ever ate was a grape. Fitting for a woman who'd grown up on a vineyard. Oh, the joy extracted from that one grape! As though she knew it was her last.

Two weeks before she died I pulled out Anthony Hassall's book on Randolph Stow. I could still remember where I picked it up: in the bargain bin outside Sydney's now defunct Norton Street Bookshop in Leichhardt. Why it occurred to me to take it to my mother on that particular day, I don't know. Perhaps because the palliative nurse had suggested we read aloud to her. Perhaps because I knew how much my mother loved Stow's poetry. Or perhaps to help her write one last card to him, to say goodbye.

I handed her the Stow book, having marked what I remembered as her favourite poems. She immediately perused a page, sighed, and then looked up.

'May I read this?'

We were astonished. Our mother could no longer read, or, even if she could, had lost the faculty for comprehension. For months, we had watched her pick up the *Sydney Morning Herald* from her doorstep each morning and spend the rest of the day perusing it in the lounge room, on the patio, in the park, often reading the same article over and over. It looked as though she was doing it out of habit and that in reality she couldn't understand a word. Long before the stomach cancer, she had suffered a brain tumour that had resulted in symptoms of dementia.

'Yes, please do,' I said.

{ FOR ONE DYING

Now, in that place where all birds cease to sing,
and paths grow faint and melt into the hills,
you pause, tasting the wind; for it is spring,
and down on Ellendale's wide water spills
a dust of petals. In this last September,
opening your hands to seize the golden light
(your hands which flowers and animals remember,

and trees, and children) you will enter night.

I am no more the child whom you made cry
so readily with your sad ballad-tales,
not skilled to soothe the life that prays to die,
not skilled to pray. But must, since all else fails,
trust that your Lord, who owes you some amend,
grant you a quiet night, and a perfect end.

‡ RANDOLPH STOW

My mother stopped. She had read ‘For One Dying’ with flawless rhythm and timing, like someone who had been studying poetry all her life, who had been tutored about exactly where to lay the emphasis, when to pause, when to breathe; like someone who had been in rehearsal, like someone who truly understood both the particularities and the universal truth of that poem.

All three of us – my sister, brother and I – looked at her, stunned.

‘That is my favourite poem,’ she announced, oblivious. ‘He wrote it for his aunt. She was such a wonderful woman.’ And she sighed.

By this time my mother had been fasting for a week and I had noticed a definite affect; it was as though she was on a high, or was beginning to transcend into a different dimension, or had become a purely physical, sensual being. Or all of those things. She appeared to have undergone exactly what poetry is intended to achieve: a defamiliarisation of the world in all its glorious detail, so that everything – from morning sunlight to the song of magpies in the late afternoon – was a marvel.

‘Oh, look at those flowers,’ she exclaimed, over and over, at the display on the table from the market offerings brought to her bedside. ‘Ohh ...’ she warbled, barely able to contain her delight. ‘The colours! Have you seen the flowers?’ she would ask for the umpteenth time.

Colours, scents, textures, birdcalls – all were overwhelmingly intense and full of delight. Awesome in the true old-fashioned sense of the word, just as the ageing narrator of *Tourmaline* says:

It is for this I live nowadays, for the pleasures of my senses; a scent of leaves, a voice, a breeze on my dripping body.

*

Before I left that day I handed my mother a card and a pen. ‘Won’t you write a few lines to Randolph Stow?’ I asked. I’d never been able to drop the habit of using his proper, writerly name. ‘Michael’ sounded so ordinary.

‘Later,’ she said.

But she said that about everything: ‘Later,’ she said, with a wave of the hand. I was never sure whether she was aware or not that there would be no ‘later’. A few days passed but my mother never wrote. So I found Stow’s details in her address book and wrote to her friend myself, advising him of Joan’s condition.

Of course, we had known for a long time that our mother was dying. The surgery for the stomach cancer had not been successful and we had watched her growing gradually weaker. When we’d visited the specialist psychogeriatric clinic, the clinician had said that Joan could well have dementia now as well as the brain damage. There was no way to distinguish one condition from the other. And it didn’t

really matter because there was no treatment for either. My mother could no longer find her way from the railway station to my house because I had moved recently and when someone has this particular kind of brain damage, they cannot form new memories. My sister, though, had been in the same house for the last twenty years, so our mother could easily find her way there.

‘She has access to old memories,’ the doctor had said, ‘but she can’t lay down new memories.’

*

A nurse had come to advise on how to make my mother’s tiny house safe for someone who was increasingly debilitated. She made some recommendations: a slip mat for the bath, removal of the sitting-room rug (too easy to trip over), and handles and rails for the steps leading from the hallway to the lounge room. So I arranged for a handyman to install the necessary bits. My sister, Cathy, was at our mother’s house to supervise that day. When the handyman arrived, Cathy turned to our mother and asked if she was sure she wanted handles in the hallway above the stairs. My mother said she didn’t because Joan had never admitted in her life that she needed anything. So my sister sent the handyman away.

*

A few days later we had a family meeting to discuss the care of our mother. My brother and I were sitting in the study at Cathy’s place, listening to our elder sister outline the plan.

‘Now that the extension to this house is finished,’ said Cathy, ‘I can put Mum in my old room and look after her here. But if I am going to take time off work, I need at least eight hundred dollars a week. Eight hundred and no less,’ she emphasised. ‘So I am going to take this out of Mum’s savings account.’

My brother nodded. I said nothing. Both of us had learnt a long time ago that negotiation was not part of the deal. Ever since our parents had separated, when I was eight, Cathy had been the de-facto authority figure. Russell and I never dared to question her.

*

A hospital bed was delivered to my sister’s spare room. But at night my mother had terrible nightmares, unspeakable diarrhoea and seemed to be losing her mind.

My sister didn’t cope. The morphine dose was too low, she insisted. On the other hand, the nurse suggested it could be the morphine causing the nightmares in the first place.

So the conflict was set. My sister insisting Joan needed more morphine; the nurse saying that if she had any more, she would fall into unconsciousness.

*

We all took shifts. My sister in the morning, me in the afternoon, my brother in the evening, complemented by a team of carers. Disagreement between the chief palliative nurse, who had been attending my mother for over a year, and my sister, worsened. The doctor was called to confirm the levels of medication, but Cathy wasn’t convinced. She wanted Joan to go to a hospice. But my mother had said repeatedly, for decades, that she wanted to die in her own bed.

So a meeting was arranged between the doctor, my mother and my sister. And Joan, delirious and

desperately ill, got her way.

The ambulance returned to Leichhardt and took her home to Newtown. The hospital bed went back to the hospital and she settled into her own narrow single bed of white wrought iron. The hospital issue bedding was also returned, and replaced with her floral, embroidered pillow slips and soft, wool sheets.

Among the linen, I found five woollens that I had brought back from five different trips to Ireland: a cream, hand-crocheted shawl from Galway, a fine blue and green blanket from Limerick, a brown angora rug from Clare, a red and mauve mohair with a label saying Avoca Weavers next to a picture of a donkey and a cart, as well as a small heavy mantle of natural wool that still, after a decade, smelled of lanolin and sheep. I had to wonder what had inspired these consistent, somewhat unimaginative gifts – the thought perhaps that my mother, like a newborn, was in constant need of wrapping and cosseting; a fear that, even after all these years, she was still too fragile to be in the world without protection? As though she were missing a skin. No wonder she and Stow seemed kindred spirits.

I laid the mauve mohair on top, even though a hole had worn through in the corner, because I had an idea it was her favourite. As she lost weight and became thinner and thinner, I piled on more.

Our shifts continued, assisted by a team of privately employed and extremely expensive night nurses. One of them took my sister's 'side' against the chief palliative nurse, arguing for increasing the morphine.

So the war intensified and for those last three weeks of our mother's life my sister and I argued mostly silently or by proxy, and occasionally not so silently: first over where our mother should die and then over how.

Every morning of those last three weeks my mother insisted on walking from her bedroom along the hallway and down the three steps to the lounge room so she could sit up and feel she was still taking part in life. She wasn't going to spend her entire day dying. As she approached the steps she clutched at the walls, just in the place the handles were supposed to have been installed, her fingers grabbing at the flat surface for stability. In these moments I loathed my sister. Too late now to ask the handyman to come and drill into the walls, too late to make sense of my sister's decision. It was all I could do to keep our mother safely tucked in under her pile of Irish blankets.

Only much later did I realise that when the handyman came to prepare my mother's house for dying, my sister was also terminally ill. If she had allowed the modifications, it would have been like watching a rehearsal for her own decline, and her own decline, which she kept largely a secret, was much closer than any of us could have guessed.

Sisters are known for their intense and often discordant relationships, and in my family nothing was moderation. We always went to extremes, whether it was politics, love, hate, rage or sibling rivalry. Of the two of us, my sister was the more virtuous. She worked harder and longer hours, leafleted for the Greens, knitted cardigans for newborns, hand-fed baby magpies and lived a life of celibacy. I, on the other hand, was inherently lazy, neglected my chooks and had deceived my last husband to have an affair with a younger man from my yoga class. Cathy was a wonderful cook; she followed the recipes to the letter. I didn't own a recipe book; I made things up as I went along. Cathy was a meticulous researcher for a current affairs program; her desk was in order, her information in neat alphabetic files. She was always talking about the stories she was working on – torture of the Basque people in Spain, the psychiatric ailments of staff in Australian detention centres. She wanted to do stories, she said, that would change things – improve the world, *make a difference*. I, on the other hand, just wanted to tell stories for the sake of the story. She believed this was very indulgent, and she was probably right. And yet, we were also uncannily alike, as only sisters can be. In the end, as our mother lay dying, we could barely look at each other; partly, I suspect, because one cannot bear too much reflection of the self.

*

Growing up I had adored and worshipped my beautiful big sister with long blond hair; if only I could be like her! I wore her clothes, listened to her music, followed her wherever she went and copied everything she did. I especially wanted to be a rebel just like her.

My older sister was notoriously rebellious – six years older than me – I always looked up to her. Expelled from school, she was sent to boarding school, then became a runaway and took acid. She even had her own little business making tie-died T-shirts, which she sold at the flea markets – a pretty blond hippy drop-out with a boyfriend who also had hair down to his waist, sang the blues and screened printed radical posters at Sydney University's swarming centre of insurrection: the Tin Sheds. My sister was my sister cool. I had a lot to live up to by the time I got to high school.

During my first year at Gympie High I soon realised that I would never achieve my sister's legendary standing. She was a way better rebel than me – more effective, more articulate. I couldn't get expelled even when I tried; I had to walk out in a huff at lunchtime one day. And even then, no one noticed.

Now I realise that we were both trying to be like our father. Our father was the best rebel of all. As a child, I sometimes went to the university during the school holidays and I could see that my father wasn't like anyone else there. All the other men wore ties and leather shoes. My father wore denim shorts and thongs. All the other men brushed their hair before they came to work. My father

unkempt wisps stuck out at all angles from his balding scalp. He didn't care about superficial things like neat haircuts. He cared about the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese peasants, and humanity. I noticed that the other people at the university looked at him oddly because he acted more like a student than a lecturer – but that only proved to me how special he really was.

Many years later when I got my first job at a university, I couldn't understand why the students just walked in and out of class willy-nilly and sat up the back in couples whispering or texting while I was trying to give a lecture. Then I had a revelation: it was because I had no authority. I had no authority because I didn't believe in authority. I didn't believe in authority because I had been brought up to believe that being authoritarian was bad. But after that first semester I changed. I confiscated phones and disallowed eating and drinking in class. I became 'Scary Carey'. But I didn't care. I was the teacher of my students. I wasn't trying to be their friend, much less their lover. My father, on the other hand, had had something of a reputation. Perhaps we can blame it on the times – free love, along with the sixties, came late to Australia.

But this was why my sister began to resent our father: because of his infidelity. Later, the resentment turned to hatred. And then, much later, after he died, the hatred turned on the person who most resembled our faithless father, and that was me.

The night my mother died I was in St Stephen's Hall in Church Street with my son, watching him throwing clubs with the Newtown Jugglers. I loved the juggling club because everyone was so odd and intensely devoted. During the day, jugglers were IT specialists and software nerds; by night they were fanatics who spent hours perfecting rhythms and routines that involved hoops, clubs, batons and balls of every colour, shape and size. This wasn't a hobby, it was a vocation. Sometimes they practised in pairs or teams of four, five and six; at other times alone, often falling into a kind of self-induced hypnosis that involved the body and the mind in perfect unison. Until a ball dropped or a baton bounced or the unicycle slipped.

'And then I dropped,' I heard them say. Or, 'I can do twenty-four before I drop.' Keeping your ball in the air, up, buoyant and fluid, defying gravity, was the aim. The drop point was the extent of a person's ability. Yet, because they always fell, because everyone dropped all the time, the jugglers didn't see it as a failure. Juggling was the least competitive sport I'd ever witnessed and I loved everything about it: the people, the props, the apparent pointlessness of it all. And for my son, who like me had never been interested in team sports, juggling was the perfect activity.

The night my mother died I knew that my brother and sister and one of the nurses were in her house. What I didn't know was that all three of them were sitting in the lounge room, while my mother died alone in the bedroom. Perhaps that's how she wanted it. My favourite palliative nurse had told me how some people wait until everyone has gone so they can die in peace; that some people didn't want witnesses, that dying, like sex, was a private thing.

I could have chosen not to go to the juggling club that night. I knew my mother was near the end. Her breathing had turned into a rasping death rattle and her appearance was of someone already dead. The nurse had told me the last sense to leave a dying body was hearing, so I had sat by her bedside and read T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Just in case.

My brother rang me on the mobile as I was getting into the car outside St Stephen's Hall.

'She's gone,' he said.

I called my daughter and was relieved when she didn't answer. She would have a more peaceful night without knowing. Then I looked at my watch.

It was twenty minutes past nine.

19 APRIL 2009

Dear Gabrielle,

Thank you very much for your card. I was very sad to hear that Joan is so ill. We knew each other such a long time – I think since my age was in single figures, when she was nursing at Geraldton before she married Alex – and later on, when I was a schoolboy and undergraduate, her letters from London were like a window on the world. I can still tell you who her favourite ballerina was (Elaine Tyfield) and how she met Alex again (accidentally on a park bench). Do give her my fond regards.

It seems appropriate for you to read ‘For One Dying’, as ‘Ap’ (my great-aunt, for whom it was written) knew Joan well and was fond of her.

With all good wishes to you both,

Mick Randolph Stow

By the time this card arrived, my mother had been dead for four days. She had died in her own bed, which was her wish, but it had not been the ‘perfect end’ that Stow had wished for his aunt. I knew we’d done our best to relieve her suffering but my mother had not been granted a quiet night. And when one has accompanied a person through her dying, it is difficult not to spend the following days, months, years, wondering how one might have done it better.

I gazed at Stow’s writing, the neatly inscribed sentences in black ink.

... when I was a schoolboy and undergraduate, her letters from London were like a window on the world ...

Why did my mother correspond with a young man, an adolescent, thirteen years her junior, who wasn’t even a relation? And where were her letters now?

I realised I had never known my mother to go to the ballet. She had not mentioned ballerinas even when I’d been to ballet lessons as a child. What was this life she had lived, when she had been such a ballet regular that she had developed a ‘favourite ballerina’? And who was Elaine Tyfield?

Most mysteriously of all, however, were the words about my father, ‘and how she met Alex again (accidentally on a park bench).’ Again? Accidentally? On which park bench?

Stow knew more about my mother, and perhaps my family, than I did. Writing back with our sad news, I enclosed the memorial bookmark we had designed for her funeral, printed with his poem ‘For One Dying’ and a copy of my book *Waiting Room*, which had been launched five days before she died.

*

My mother was extremely secretive and not a natural storyteller. Although she did occasionally tell stories about growing up on a vineyard in the Swan Valley of Western Australia, they were very few and, I see now, heavily edited. One of the rare stories she told and retold about Randolph Stow was from his days as a schoolboy at Guildford Grammar School, on the Swan River not far from

‘Oakover’, her home in Middle Swan.

‘I’ll never forget,’ she’d say, ‘how he swam across the river one afternoon, holding his school clothes high in one hand.’ Apparently Stow had stripped down to his underwear and then paddled, one handed, across the muddy water, so he could visit Joan and her family.

I’ve never quite understood why he seemed to be such a regular visitor, or how the families were connected, but my mother gave me the impression that during his time as a boarder at Guildford Stow was virtually adopted by the Fergusons. So I simply explained it to myself by imagining he must have felt very alone, being so far from his home in Geraldton, and that the Fergusons were somehow acquainted with the Stows in the way that all the old established families of Western Australia seemed to know each other. While Stow was still at high school, my mother left her home in the Swan Valley. She wasn’t going far by West Australian standards – three hundred miles north to work at the Geraldton Hospital – but at least it was somewhere new and a kind of freedom. And so, as the Fergusons had hosted young Randolph during his years as a boarder at Guildford, while my mother lived in Geraldton that hospitality was returned. She stayed in the nurses’ quarters (now a supermarket car park) but was a frequent visitor to the Stow and Sewell families, and became particularly fond of Stow’s great-aunt Suthie, nicknamed Ap. Aunt Ap was the model for Aunt Kay in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* and the dedicatee of the poem ‘For One Dying’. Of all the women who surrounded Stow growing up, Ap was the most important and influential. It was she who read him the Border ballads, recited Lord Randall, who sang to him in Gaelic and taught him to love all things Scottish. ‘Above all others,’ according to Roger Averill, Stow’s authorised biographer, ‘she lavished time and attention on the young Stow and encouraged his interests and talents.’

*

A week or so later a blue, old-fashioned airmail envelope arrived with a white address sticker on the front: *J.R. Stow, 28 King’s Head Street, Harwich, Essex CO12 3EE*. It was on beautiful high-quality paper, complete with letterhead.

10 MAY 2009

Dear Gabrielle,

*Many thanks for letting me know of Joan’s sad but expected passing, and for the copy of *Waiting Room* which I much admired. It is very sobering reading for someone of my age; but your behaviour, and that of your sister and brother, and Joan herself, was, in the end, heartening to read about. Joan wrote to me the Christmas after the operation, or perhaps it was two Christmases later, after she had been in Western Australia, and mentioned by the way that she had been operated on for a brain tumour, sounding surprised and rather elated (I think there was an exclamation mark after ‘brain tumour’).*

This quintessentially writerly inclusion of the detail of an exclamation mark was of immense solace to me. And Stow’s reading of my mother’s tone as one of elation rather than regret was a great relief. Convincing my mother to undergo the operation had been difficult and I was criticised. So when only a few years later she was diagnosed with another cancer, I was filled with doubt; why hadn’t we obeyed her wishes the first time, instead of manipulating her into surgery? Should we have let her just choose her own exit strategy, the one of least resistance? Can there be any right way to choose between radical intervention and passive inaction?

After my father had died suddenly and violently twenty-five years ago, I was certain that we had been far too passive. Like Stow, my father, who had also grown up in Geraldton, suffered from a similar ingrained, if well-hidden, melancholy that eventually led him to a place so dark he could never return. But if someone had just had the courage to intervene, to force him to a medical or mental health practitioner, he might still be here today, perhaps celebrating his ninetieth birthday, enjoying his grandchildren. If only he had been convinced to take a course of anti-depressants, he might have made it through his dark night.

At the time I received Stow's letter I was suffering from what psychologists call 'a severe grief reaction' but what might have been more correctly described as a complete nervous breakdown. Although my mother's death was, as Stow described, 'expected', I had nevertheless fallen into a state of intense bereavement. I couldn't think; I couldn't work, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. My weight dropped to forty-four kilograms. Friends thrust tins of Sustagen at me, the same powdered energy food I had mixed up just weeks before for my skeletal mother. People in deep grief can sometimes mimic the illness or symptoms of the loved one recently lost, and I wondered if I was slowly starving myself to death. Yet, even with that awareness, I couldn't bring myself to eat.

The letter continued:

In 1963, when I was back in Australia for a year as a lecturer at UWA, I went for a drive with a student, Peter Holland (since a famous face on WA television, I believe) and called at Oakover. Your grandparents were out, but we hung about for some time, drinking in the wonderful tranquillity and beauty of the place. Peter was ecstatic, never having been anywhere like it, perhaps he remembers it still. The overarching oak tree, and the huge olive trees from which Italians used to harvest the fruit for oil were there as you described them. On the back lawn, I learnt from your grandmother how to sun-dry my own grandmother's figs. On one of my weekends from school, I took a bus from the Sandalford side of the Swan and swam across, holding my clothes and weekend bag over my head with one arm.

At last! My mother's favourite story had been confirmed! Even better, I could imagine the schoolboy Stow, under my grandmother's supervision, helping to arrange the figs on the drying racks behind Oakover – that special fruit that had meant so much to my mother, that symbolised the earth's goodness of Western Australia, the fruit she missed so much when she came to Sydney, and Stow must have missed even more when he settled in England.

We were the only kids at school who took dried figs for lunch. Our mother bought them in round tins imported from Turkey. Clearly these were strange, exotic, grown-up fruit – rare and expensive – but I had no idea that my mother had grown up amid season after season of abundant fig crops as well as grape harvests.

What surprised me most was how far the connections stretched back. Stow's maternal grandfather George Sewell, had been schooled with my great uncle Douglas Ferguson.

My grandfather's name was George Ernest Sewell. (Men called him George, women Ernest.) [He] and Douglas Ferguson of Houghton were devoted friends, in the Victorian manner of Tennyson and Hallam. My grandmother remembered visiting Douglas after he'd been ill and said: 'I never saw two men who so loved each other; they were quite funny.'

Later on in life, when both men had established themselves as farmers, George used Douglas's farm Moora as a resting place for sheep on the long walk from Guildford to Geraldton. (Moora, I realise later, is also where Rick and Rob take a rest during their droving trip in *The Merry-Go-Round in the*

Sea.)

*

Once, on a trip to Western Australia, my father had brought home reproductions of old black-and-white portraits. The faces of those men, women and children in their staged photographs had thrilled me to at last see what my clan looked like. But there were no names on the backs, no dates, no details. And no explanatory anecdotes from my father, who was too busy with his university work and with his anti-Vietnam war activism to pass the stories on even if he'd had the inclination. They lie still in a pile in my desk drawer – dozens of unnamed strangers who are in some way related to me. And now here was Stow, writing from the other side of the world, with real, solid information – not only about the Fergusons, but also the Carey side as well.

He wrote finally:

This has turned into quite a long essay, so I will end it by saying thanks again for your book and what is in it, and I'm very glad to have this memoir of a dear old friend.

With all good wishes

Sincerely,

Mick Randolph Stow

For some reason I didn't notice the phone number at the bottom of the page. It is now one of my greatest regrets that I never attempted to call.

A dear old friend. My mother had said that one of the reasons Stow left Australia was because he was homosexual and being homosexual in Western Australia in the 1950s, especially if you came from a 'good family', was simply not tolerated. Other accounts suggest that he was bi-sexual.

As a university student Stow had girlfriends, including the broadcaster Penny Sutherland, with whom he stayed in contact for many years. There is also a story that, as a young resident at Sydney University's St Paul's College, Stow had tried to take an overdose of pills after being left heartbroken over a girl. Someone went into the room and found him, and so he was rescued.

How much sense does all this make? Stow was young. Perhaps he still hadn't 'come out'. Yet, the love must have been passionate to have left him truly heartbroken.

Was this the beginning of what he described as his deeply melancholic character? Melancholy might arise from lost or unrequited love. Or perhaps, as he suggested in an interview, it was genetic and he had simply inherited 'the vile Stow melancholy' he had witnessed in his father and his father's father.

Whispered commentary about Stow's suicide attempt at Sydney University might be dismissed if it weren't for *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. In that novel, Rick's girlfriend takes an overdose of sleeping pills after Rick breaks off their engagement. She survives her heartbreak, as well as the overdose. But this sudden act of violence seems out of character with the rest of the novel, and quite unnecessary to the plot and structure. Since every other significant event in that novel is based on fact, it is possible that Stow was writing out something that had happened in real life.

*

Suicide and suicide attempts also feature in Stow's other books: Cawdor, in *Visitants*, who successfully suicides; Clare, in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, who survives an attempt; and Michael Random in *Tourmaline*, who also bears suicide scars. Both Clare and Cawdor look like aspects of Stow himself. As a writer he has been described as 'the Australian Camus' so it's not unexpected that Stow should consider seriously Camus' famous 'first philosophical question'.

Stow was a deeply private person and suicide is perhaps the most deeply private decision a person can make, so his alleged suicidal moment was probably not an event he wanted to see publicly discussed. However, when asked about whether he believed that 'knowing something of the life and personality of an artist can help to understand his work', Stow's response was, 'I think one does need to know a great deal – well, a certain amount, anyway, about an author's life ... and not only what he chooses to have known.' He goes on to talk about Conrad, on whom he had lectured: 'For instance, it wasn't known until quite recently that he [Conrad] had tried to commit suicide as a young man. I must say that it is obviously something that one needs to know.'

Sadly, I wrote back to Stow immediately with feverish curiosity. I spent the entire day in composing my response, five pages of questions, so excited was I by his memories, his insights, his thoughtfulness. I foolishly believed that this was the opening to a real and perhaps literary friendship, mentioning my interest in Joyce, in the vain hope that he might respond and reveal his long-held interest in all things Joycean. I realise now it must have been like receiving an interrogation. And given that we barely knew each other, I perhaps shouldn't have been so familiar as to suggest that I visit him in Harwich. (I had presumptuous visions of us sitting over a beer together.) His card on return arrived swiftly and was more than clear:

Dear Gabrielle

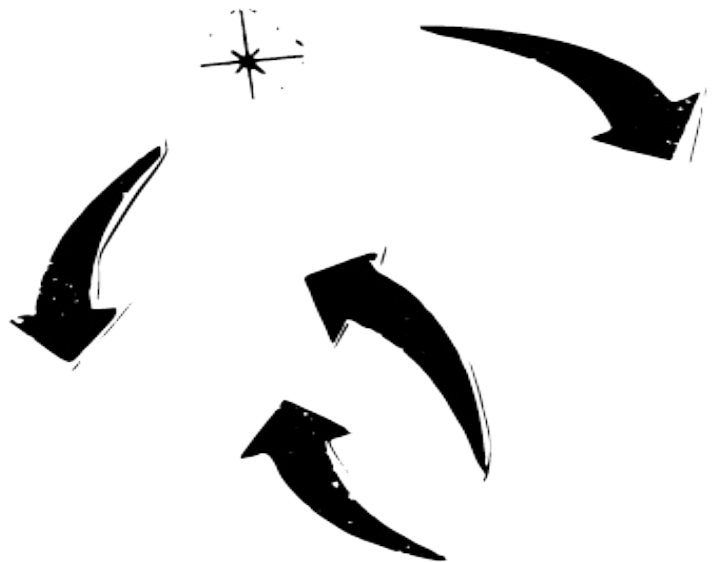
It's friendly of you to suggest meeting up with me here, but I hope you won't take it amiss if I say that I'm old and ailing nowadays, rather an unsavoury old bachelor, and people understand that I don't like to be seen like this and prefer to be left alone. This sounds awfully unsociable, but I really have told you all that I know about the Fergusons and the Careys.

With every good wish ...

I didn't believe him. I was sure he knew more – but he was clearly putting up a boundary that I was not to overstep. I was disappointed but I was also, at the time, extremely ill.



WRECKED



28 MAY 2010

ERA ENDS FOR ICONIC SWING

‘The merry-go-round won’t go round any more. Mayor Ian Carpenter said the structure would stay, and be open to the public as a fixed bench, but was too dangerous to continue as a merry-go-round.’

— *The Geraldton Guardian*

29 MAY 2010

MERRY-GO-ROUND AUTHOR STOW DIES

Randolph Stow, one of WA’s finest writers, has died in England ...

— *The West Australian*

31 MAY 2010

RANDOLPH STOW: *AUSTRALIA LOSES ONE OF ITS GREATEST WRITERS*

— *The Australian*

10 JUNE 2010

WANDERER’S MER- RY-GO-ROUND IS OVER

Randolph Stow Born November 28, 1935;
died May 29, 2010

— *Canberra Times*

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