

KITE STRINGS

The first night of the third lockdown, I dreamed. Not the frightening, debilitating type of dream so many people have experienced throughout the nine months of this unbelievable pandemic . . . no, my dream was of flying.

I felt the wind against my face and my stomach leapt as I swooped over bluffs and ridges. The land below swept by in a blur of ochres. Clearly, I was in desert country. The sky was a piercing blue with a harsh sun beating down with that oppressive heat that makes shoulders and the backs of legs prickle with incipient sunburn.

The sense of flying was exhilarating. And I wasn't alone. I was aware that there, at my fingertip, another accompanied me. I couldn't see him, but I could sense him. We climbed and swooped in tandem. The control we both had – the change of direction, the twisting in the air just before the thought was there – was addictive. In my dream I strove to become more and more adventurous. I flipped and somersaulted and dove and climbed . . . and still that sensation; that I was not alone; that someone was there, matching my every move, tracking my mind, keeping pace with the frenetic speed I was moving, stayed with me. We smashed through that wild, turbulent air together and my tears flowed unchecked. I told myself it was obvious - the wind was making my eyes water.

I slowed then and relaxed, gliding lazily, rising slowly in spirals as I rode the thermals, content to spread my body onto the buoyant air beneath me gazing in wonder at the passing landscape beneath me. Where was I, I wondered. The land was arid and burnt up. Vast tracks of nothingness; just dun coloured sand and rock merging into each other. Was it Africa . . . or maybe, Australia, or even the USA?

I craned my neck in an effort to make out any discernible features, hoping to give myself a clue to the country I was flying over - but the sudden movement unbalanced my body precariously and catapulted me forward and I found myself plunging towards the ground. The air streamed around me and I felt my hair standing straight above my head, changing direction every time my body turned over and over, tumbling through the sky. As I fell, burning colours of orange and red and khaki surrounded me and I felt a searing heat slash across my face. In my dream a jagged, panicked thought screamed through my mind, "I'm falling and burning!".

Of course, I woke safe in my bed. The sheets were tangled and the searing heat was only my hot water bottle that had pressed against my cheek in the gyrations of my dream - a childlike comfort I couldn't give up, and which, even in the height of summer, I'd taken to bringing to bed, to leach a little solace from the sterility of sleeping by myself after forty odd years of shared slumber.

I took a few moments to come to and lay for a while, emotionally and mentally exhausted from the wild ride. It was a strange sensation for me to dream. Years of compromised sleep isn't conducive to dreaming. I snuggled back down in my comfy bed, pulling a discarded blanket from the floor and lay quietly, thinking about dreaming and my customary lack of it. But then again, maybe it wasn't so strange that I'd finally dreamed now. So many were living through their own horrific experience of disempowerment . . . suffocating while struggling to breathe, tethered to a ventilator, wrapped tightly in a hospital bed, unable to move, to talk or to break through the glutinous, gelatinous bubble trapping them inside their own nightmares. No wonder terrifying scenarios were being conjured in sleep.

I moved then to disentangle myself from the muddled chaos of my bedding and, catching the red digits shining forth from the clock at my bedside, I realised it was only three am. The witching hour I thought and scrambled from my bed to peer through the window. The garden was dark. Across the narrow lane I saw the hunched shape of my neighbour's old cottage, hunkered down, clutching the earth with its whitewashed, bulging walls, glowing palely luminescent in the dark, its thatched eaves creeping down, well past the edge of a modern roof. The cottage had been there since the 1600's – in village vernacular it was called "Tom's Cottage" and only the older members of the oldest families in the oldest part of the neighbourhood knew the origins of its name. Studying the black shape in the cold dark, I imagined the cottage speaking to me. Its solid, reassuring presence calmed me; its traditional, quintessential Englishness – an Englishness that made all my visitors exclaim with delight when they looked out of the window – gave me hope. This will pass it seemed to say. Don't worry, I've seen it all before. This will pass.

Standing at the dark window, I shivered with cold. This lockdown was different from the previous ones. Waking at strange hours last year, I would make a cup of tea or, if it was a particularly hot night, a cool drink, and walk around my

garden. I'd discovered the delight of being alone in the dead of night, the light from the moon shining with its particularly silvery light, casting unfamiliar shadows across my vegetable and flower beds. Even the grass took on a different character. A magical, unearthly, ethereal character. Sitting at my patio table, sipping my drink quietly, hearing the twitt-ing of the male owls and the answering twoo-ing of the females, I could believe that at any moment a door would open in the roots of the ancient, protected oak tree that grew at the edge of my garden and I'd be able to spy on the fairy folk's secret activities.

It was too cold to go outside now, though. I shivered again and went to the wardrobe to find something warm to put on. Hanging on the hook inside the door was the soft, fur lined jacket my sister had bought for Bob a few years before his death. As his illness progressed, he found it more and more difficult to stay warm. The jacket hung in the wardrobe as if ready to perform its duty, keeping him snug and cosy, at any moment. I hadn't been able to give it away with all his other clothes – hadn't even been able to launder it. Its presence, hanging behind the door, gave me the illusion he was still here; maybe sleeping quietly in the high, hospital bed that had been installed in our bedroom, or perhaps, having been hoisted out of bed by a volunteer carer, into his wheelchair and then manoeuvred out of it again and onto the stairlift, to slowly and painfully be manhandled into the garden to sit for a while.

Despite myself, knowing just how my stomach would lurch with grief, I lifted the bottom of the jacket and buried my face into its soft, warm fur. There was a time when the jacket was redolent with his smell. I could close my eyes and feel his arms wrapping around me, his chin tucking into the top my head. Now, there was nothing. In less than two years, the rich, intimate, personal smell that had immediately invoked his presence has dissipated. But still the heavy, cosy warmth gave me some comfort. I shrugged the jacket on and went downstairs.

Putting the kettle on, I thought about my dream. That wonderfully, exhilarating feeling of flying and twirling through the air. And then I thought of the silent scream as I fell from the sky. "I'm falling and burning". Where had that come from, I wondered.

I made my tea, relishing the shadowed spaces of the kitchen. The cold, dimly lit atmosphere of the kitchen at night-time took me right back to my childhood. Memories of standing with my father in the tiny kitchen of my childhood home, were reassuring; both of us in pyjamas, both of us shivering in the unheated house, both of us with bare feet turning blue, on cold, unforgiving lino. My father's tall figure towered above me, reaching into the little cupboard set high in the old-fashioned run of cabinets, to find the Milk of Magnesia in its blue bottle, standing ready to soothe nocturnal tummy aches. Marooned together in the kitchen while the rest of the house slept, I sipped at the chalky mixture trying not to gag but enjoying the time on my own with my daddy. My world had been turned upside down with the arrival of unexpected twin babies. From being the special one, four years old and the oldest of two girls, I'd been pushed aside. Suddenly I had all the responsibility of being the big sister – no time for me to have a cuddle on my mummy's knee, no time for a story, or to have my hair combed. No wonder I'd developed pains in my tummy in the depths of night.

I sent a loving thought to the distant, troubled little girl, laden with responsibility, I'd once been, and sat down, legs tucked under me, Bob's faux fur jacket bulked up around me like a counterfeit hug, and a ragged patchwork quilt tumbled riotously nearby, ready to pull up if I felt cold. A reading light sat on the countertop cantilevered over the side, perfectly positioned to illuminate a book, for anyone who plonked themselves down on the old settee in the corner of the kitchen. The comfortable, squashy cushion below the lamp held only one imprint though – a space moulded exclusively for me. There'd been no other reader, elbowing me out of the way, selfishly anxious to claim the best reading spot on the settee for himself, in a long time . . . too long. Much too long, I thought.

With effort, I stopped thinking that melancholy thought and looked at the piles of books that covered the little table next to my seat.

There was an eclectic mix. Newly published works, fiction and non-fiction, as well as old favourites. I perused the titles. There was no particular genre. During the enforced self-isolation, I'd indulged myself, reading the broadsheets Arts pages, picking and choosing from the book reviews. And then, not to be too middle class, I'd followed things up on the internet; I particularly enjoyed going down rabbit holes,

reading or hearing a snippet, a phrase or statement I liked and chasing it to find a new book or idea at the end of that rainbow. I'd ended up with an amazingly diverse collection of reading matter. I've read more books than ever in this last strange year; a year of enforced solitary existence with few distractions to ameliorate suffocating loss.

I touched the side table, reassuring myself of the solidity of its structure and the reality of the wealth of books piled across it. These books have become my anchor – though, admittedly, it'd been a slow process. Reading had been one of things I'd lost in grief. Trying to concentrate on print, my mind had fluttered like a trapped butterfly, unable to settle to anything, unable to concentrate, unable to make sense of the crowded black typeface imprinted opaquely upon the page. Even deciphering the sensationalist headlines of a tabloid lying on a shop counter, took too much effort. My body, too, couldn't keep still. In the lonely months after my loss the empty house became a suffocating life force - sucking the oxygen out of me, draining motivation and exacerbating loneliness. The only way I could survive was to be out in the community, keeping as busy as possible, taking on project after project – organising charity events, volunteering at the Hospice, joining clubs, shopping for the elderly.

Lockdown was a shock.

I was forced to stay at home.

At first, I paced the house as if it was my prison cell. It was my old favourites that saved me – dipping into a book just anywhere in its pages, reading an isolated paragraph out of context, picking slowly at *Remains of the Day*, or *The Kite Runner*, reading a little Kate Atkinson, Jane Austin or even something like *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, taking it slowly, in infinitely tiny little steps. I was able to train my mind and body to spend longer and longer in one place, to concentrate on one thing and finally feel a semblance of peace in my own home.

I look at my pile again. I have several on the go, but I don't want to read now. Instead, I reach up, kneeling and stretching across the counter-top, for my phone, lying attached to its charger. I click on the clock app and check what time it is – two pm in Sydney, seven pm in California. Perfect. I open WhatsApp and listen to the characteristic husky sound of the dialling. The two screens open almost

simultaneously and I'm immediately transported into two different worlds. Josh, is standing on a narrow path at the edge of the Harbour, sweating and panting. He's in running clothes and the world behind him is bright and glaring. Steve is walking rapidly through his house, phone in hand. I register a blur of rooms and furniture behind him as we charge through.

"Hi, mum," they say in chorus from other sides of the world.

At Steve's place, we burst into the bathroom and I see a lopsided view of a bath with two little boys splashing in water, Tess, the black Labrador, has come in with Steve and is leaping onto the side of the bath as two voices shout, "It's Nanny, Hi Nanny". And then they catch sight of Josh and shout at him too.

"Uncle Josh, we're in the bath!"

There is a cacophony of barking and splashing and voices and Steve lets the boys show me their bath toys and how Robbie can lie with his head under the water for ten seconds and how Alex has lost a tooth and then he tells them he is going outside to talk to Nanny and uncle Josh. As we leave, I see Shannon, their mother, pushed into the corner, smiling widely. "Hi, Shannon," I say as we barrel by.

The boys shout, "Goodbye," and "We love you, Nanny, and Uncle Josh" and we walk out into the garden where all is calm. A firepit is burning gently on the patio which looks out over the vineyard and into the distance at the mountains. It is dark here at 7 pm and I ask Steve to hold the phone up and show me the scenery and I see the dark sky, shrouded in places with cloud, a half-moon shining through and the shadowed rows of humped vines retreating back down the valley.

Behind Josh, in contrast, I see a too bright image of the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House on the other side of Farm Cove with an occasional glimpse of triangular white sails flashing by on the glinting sea.

"Where are you, Josh?" I ask.

"Mrs MacQuarie's Chair," he says. "I'm on my run. About twelve kilometres from home. I'll sit here and talk to you. I'm sure, Mrs MacQuarie won't mind," he says laughing.

I settle back on the squashed, old, comforting settee and enjoy looking at my boys.

“You’re wearing dad’s jacket,” Steve says. “I always thought he looked like a World War Two pilot in that – even at the end when he was so frail.”

And we talk about their dad together. About our memories of him, about his pilot’s licence and his flying, the places he’d been, the things he’d done and how we miss him.

I tell the boys about my dream. The sensation I had that I was flying. How exhilarating it felt and how I just knew someone was with me. No, not someone. That Bob, their dad, was with me; just out of reach, a fingertip away.

There is a silence.

And then Steve asks, “What’s the weather like there, mum? It must be cold if you’re wearing dad’s jacket.”

And I take them to the window and I see it has started snowing. The ground is white and the air is full of swirling snowflakes. The cottage across the road swims in and out of sight, now there, now gone.

For a moment there is a tremor in my sense of reality. In the dim corner of my kitchen I can still see the little heartbroken girl, snuggling gratefully into her daddy’s lap in the sleeping house; the English Patient’s burning airplane is there too, conjured up by my mind and I suddenly realise where my dream fall had come from; Kate Atkinson’s realistic depiction of WWII has its place, vivid in my imagination; and, all the while the ancient cottage across the road wavers in my sight, seeming to contradict its solid substance. For a moment I’m lost.

And then I’m back, solid, and sure of reality, talking to my boys. Thanking technology for the miracle of connecting us like this. Attaching me to them by an intangible silver thread.

And then another picture comes. The thin strings that are reeled out high in the sky to send a multitude of kites soaring; tangible connections to this earth with their fragile illusions of freedom.