Harbin's Story

It was Lloyd Harbin who told me about them at a party over by the park. At first I didn't want to hear. I was thinking of leaving, I remember. My head pounded and the tight armholes of my dress had begun to rub. It was one of those shrill, bright nights, full of laughter and champagne. I tried to laugh too and I drank too much, but it didn't change my mood. Halfway through the evening I watched my reflection in the large mirror that hung over the mantelpiece. I smiled like everyone else, held my glass high, but amongst all the colour – the brunettes and the blondes – I looked grey and mouse small, drenched in dust and book spores from the dim-lit hush of the reading rooms where I had sat all afternoon.

I was searching for my wrap in the guest room when Harbin came waddling up to me waving a mushroom vol-au-vent in one fat hand and a glass of champagne in the other.

'Got something for you, Fran,' he said. 'A story, a princess story,' and he took me by the arm and led me out onto the balcony. It was a May midnight and still warm. I could feel the heat of the traffic, and I could see drops of perspiration on Harbin's puffy face sparkling like glass in the moonlight.

He told me that he was acting as a legal advisor to one of the Anastasias.

'A mean-faced crazy woman. Still trying to prove who she isn't.' He wiped the sweat from his face with his shirt sleeve.

Harbin said that she had been found by an exiled gardener who had tended the roses in the grounds of the palace before the revolution. The man was fishing for trout when he saw a girl wading out against the current into the middle of the estuary. For some time she stood looking towards the sea. Then the sun caught her face, and the gardener noticed the way that she held her head, the slope of her shoulders, and the colour of her hair. He saw the flecks of blue in her eyes, the pink of her lips. He watched the water dripping from her eyelashes and rolling down her cheeks, and he saw the white petticoat clinging to her scarred skin. Believing suddenly in miracles, in resurrections, he ran towards her, shouting her name. Then he took her home, dried her clothes, and cooked the muddy fish from the river. He called the girl Malenkaya.

'She became quite a celebrity,' said Harbin, 'always signing autographs and dancing with princes. Then one night she forgot herself, made a slip. She was dropped and they found someone else to take her place.'

He laughed gently.

'She still thinks she can fool them, says there's a stash of Imperial money somewhere, or jewels, or a great big Fabergé egg hidden in a London bank vault. Christ, is she crazy. Make a great story, though.'

Little fragments of pastry from the vol-au-vent drifted like gold leaf into his champagne glass. They bobbed for a while on the bubbles and then dropped slowly to the bottom.

I must have smiled at him and said something noncommittal like, 'She sounds interesting, Lloyd,' but in truth there were fabulous qualities to Harbin's tale that irritated me. The story was forty years old and it hardly seemed worth reviving. After the hard, quick-witted brightness of that night, I wanted to write about sharp things, solid and contemporary. I was tired of old stories, tired of research. The endless forages through newspapers and rotting books frustrated me, and I had become unhappy in the library basement where the arched windows were barred against the light, where every movement, every turning of the page was magnified threefold by the echoing spaces.

That was how I had spent the afternoon before the party, stumbling over syllables, and reading and rereading the few phrases I had written until they lost all sense. The dull words I had chosen during the day seemed to hang around me and weigh me down that evening as I tried to match the sharp talk. My voice sounded flat, I spoke too slowly and the things I said were leaden and plodding. I wanted to leave and was irritated that Lloyd Harbin had managed to trap me on the balcony. He grasped my bare arm and I could feel his warm damp breath on my face as he spoke, but I did not want to meet his Duchess, nor write about her story. I simply smiled and nodded at him. Then with the vague promise of a lunch date, I finally succeeded in slipping past Harbin's bulk, and left him on the balcony, contentedly sipping his champagne and listening to the cars driving down the avenue.

For several weeks after the party, I managed to elude Lloyd Harbin Believing that his story was merely a pretext for seeing me again, I resolved not to answer my doorbell, and I avoided restaurants that he frequented. I even decided to remain in my apartment until I was certain that he was safely inside his office. In those days I lived on the edge of Greenwich Village not far from Harbin's home, and I had often seen him lumbering along the streets in the morning and the early evening. Gradually, however, as the weather grew hotter and as the bitter memories of the party began to fade. I dismissed Lloyd Harbin and his Duchess from my mind. I had other things to trouble me then.

At the beginning of June my father became quite ill. He lived alone, some distance from the city, and I was obliged to stay with him while I made arrangements for his care. Strangely, during those days that we spent together, my normally tight-lipped father grew quite loquacious. After a lifetime of silence, it seemed that he needed to fill his last few months with conversation.

We had always been remote and uncommunicative. For many years we had avoided each other completely. I remember that even as a child I would deliberately wait until he had left a room and wandered away before I would enter it. We could pass entire weeks like that, not talking to one another at all apart from the necessary discussions concerning meals and school. The silence became a habit that was easier to maintain than to break. It seemed more dignified to remain taciturn and it removed the need to talk of feelings and hopes.

As I grew older, we managed to sustain a relationship of sorts comfortably distanced from one another; a relationship based on one short telephone call each month when my father would report on his health and I would talk about something bland like the films I had seen or the books I had read. He never asked me about my writing.

We continued those reserved, polite exchanges until his illness, until his last year. Only then did we really begin to talk to one another, although intermittently and, in my case, often angrily, because what he said pulled me backwards. After each conversation, I found myself scrabbling around in the dark trying to remember, trying to piece the fragments together again.

My father had always lived in the same house, a long white building balanced on a hill above a tidal creek that eventually ran into the sea. His house marked the end of an impasse. The road that led to the garden finished there, in the grass. It was perhaps for this reason that he had few visitors, only those who really wished to see him.

The house and the church were separated from the town of Bluewood by a forest. In the winter, the mist and chimney smoke hung about the trees making the pine fronds change from black-green to a sort of chalky grey, and in the spring, bluebells grew beneath the trees. As a child I was not allowed to play there, and as a consequence the forest became imbued with a dreadful mystery that seemed to drape

over the trees like a cloak as soon as the sun disappeared. I never liked to stay out too long for fear that something might come blundering out of those trees and grab me.

I played in the garden, picked the flowers or sat on the swing whose ropes were wound round the branch of an apple tree. Sometimes I used to run my hand along the wall that sheltered the plums and the blueberry bushes, looking for dips and holes in which treasure might be hidden. I had always hoped I might discover a gold coin or a diamond ring in those weathered niches, although the only objects I did find were rusting plaques screwed into the wall seventy years before to remind the gardener of the names of the fruit that had been planted there.

At the end of the drive was a rockery where short grey lavender and tumbling purple aubrietia grew. Once I found a nickel buried amongst the flowers and for several days afterwards I returned and pushed my fingers into the dense leaves, penetrating down to the dirt, hoping for more. I didn't find another coin and was scolded for flattening the plants and damaging the tiny flowers. The edges of my finger nails were ingrained with dusty soil for weeks afterwards.

It is the garden I remember, not the house. That was my father's domain. I was told to be silent as I climbed the stairs, instructed not to slam my feet flat on the bare boards above his study and asked not to shout too loudly or sing because he worked so hard. My father was a business man, a wealthy and successful one, and we had none of the worries about money that I have now. I don't suppose he ever knew or could even imagine the frustration that poverty brings: the high walled limitations, the dreariness at the end of the month, or the heart-beating fear of spending too much. In many ways I was probably a spoilt child. If I asked politely for something I always received it, and I was well educated and well travelled. Every year my father insisted on taking me somewhere and showing me something – a city, a famous building or a battlefield.

But I think the best time, in fact the only time I remember really being with him, was on the water. Sometimes in the spring and summer we took the canoe and paddled down the creek to the junction where it joined the river. I liked that feeling of moving low through the water and trailing my hand in the river's coldness. When I was older, I would kneel at the front of the boat and paddle inefficiently, for it was my father who both directed and powered the canoe. Sometimes we would pull into a bank and sit by the honeysuckle bushes where I would examine the flowers that grew there. Then, in mid summer we would take sandwiches and coffee and explore the flat sand islands that lay in the middle of the river. While my father photographed the water, I scanned the horizon from those islands, identifying our house and the skyline of the town on the opposite bank. I could sit for hours charting the once familiar buildings that had been twisted and turned into something strange by my new outlook. It was like seeing a place for the first time.

When I arrived at Bluewood during the late stages of my father's illness, I noticed that the canoe, which had always been kept on the banks of the creek, had been pulled up onto the gravel outside the house. It was lying on its side by the back door like the carcass of a large dead fish. It clearly hadn't been used for several years because the wood was dull grey and soft in places, and the name, which he had painted along the edge, *Natty*, had vanished completely. Later, sitting in his study, I asked him about the canoe, and he told me haltingly that he had stopped using it three years ago following a particularly upsetting incident.

He had set out one morning, paddling only occasionally, letting the boat gently drift with the tide. For a while, he sat looking at the ochre islands in the distance and at the birds on the sand banks. Then he had lowered his eyes and rested them on the water. Watching the ripples form and disappear, he noticed something else floating towards him,

a form shrouded in green cloth, the size of a corpse. It was swollen and knotted with seaweed. My father stared at it, horrified, as it came alongside the canoe. For a second he considered turning round, and paddling away, but the appalling shape refused to be ignored and butted sickeningly and softly against the side of the canoe. He gripped the paddle and frantically stabbed at the object with the wooden blade. The form bobbed up and down on the surface of the water and then the cloth began to unravel. He held his breath and looked down, but there was nothing inside. It was just a large piece of green sacking which unrolled into a flat length and floated away like a bad joke. He never took the canoe out again.

After recounting this story, he sighed deeply. Then slowly, he began to talk again, working steadily backwards, recalling small events that I had long forgotten. It was as if the story of the canoe had evoked other stories, memories of his past and my childhood. He spoke about the trip we made to Europe when I was fifteen, and of the birthday picnics by the river. He talked about my mother, about their wedding and their long honeymoon. Then he paused and reached over to take my hand. We rarely touched, and I was both surprised and embarrassed by this sudden display of affection.

'Do you remember the cemetery?' he asked. 'Père-Lachaise. Do you remember it?'

I had never been there and I waited for him to explain, but his thoughts seemed to weave together and grow confused.

'She wore a yellow butterfly dress,' he said. 'She had sloping shoulders and white hands. And there was a cat, I think.'

'I don't understand,' I said quietly.

He looked up at me and his eyes, which until then had been unfocused and damp, became sharper. He began again, and as I listened to his thin voice, I shivered despite the warmth of the room. Removing my hand from his, I slid it into my jacket pocket to stop the tips of my fingers numbing.

My father talked for two hours that afternoon. He didn't tell me everything, only presented me with vague outlines that he would later flesh out and describe in more detailed episodes all through the summer. When he had finished he stretched over and kissed me on the cheek. I think he was relieved that I had taken it so well.

At the end of the week I escorted my father to the nursing home. He seemed resigned about leaving the white house. He didn't even turn his head to look at the garden or the creek one last time before the taxi drove away down the lane. When we arrived at the home however, he had to be helped out of the car by two nurses and, as he leaned against them, I noticed that he was shaking. It was as if the sight of their uniforms had reminded him suddenly that he would never see his home again.

That evening I took the train back to the city and for the first time in several days I was able to contemplate the things he had told me. I repeated his words in my head while I pictured the cemetery and the woman in her butterfly dress. I saw the slope of her shoulders and her white freckled hands as she drifted past me and climbed the stone steps, but when she reached the point where the paths divided, she faded, then disappeared. However hard I tried, I could not recall her image again for each time she was supplanted by someone else: a girl with water streaming over her hair and face.

Slowly I realised who she was and the memory of that shiny May midnight party rose in my mind again. As I remembered how Lloyd Harbin had described his Anastasia my objections to working on his story began to subside. Perhaps it was the small coincidences that forced me to draw parallels between my father's memories and Harbin's tale. Or maybe the Duchess was merely an excuse and I was trying to blot out what my father had told me.