



The Art of Disappearing



ELISABETH HANSCOMBE

THE ART OF DISAPPEARING



Elisabeth Hanscombe is a psychologist and writer who lives and works in Melbourne and has published a number of short stories, personal essays and book chapters about memory, psychoanalysis, shame, trauma and memoir. She blogs at <https://www.sixthinline.com> where she explores the fine line between fact and fiction, and the ways in which frail memory plays havoc with past experience to allow new ideas to emerge.

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To my family, to my parents, to my sisters and brothers.

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Touch

THE DAYS of leaning over my father to say goodnight and to receive the scraping of his thumb on my forehead flit across my memory. My father scraped a sign of the cross on the foreheads of each of his children at bedtime. My forehead bears the mark. The long frown down its centre, worn away through the years, and a reminder to avoid touch. To stay invisible.

My father's yellow nicotine-stained fingers; the nails clipped short and clean, the smell of his brandy breath, the scrape of his accented words across my ears.

'Goede nacht,' he says in Dutch. 'Goodnight,' we say in English.

My thought then: we are safe. But later in the darkness when each has scattered off to bed, and my father starts to wander the hallway and check out the rooms, I freeze over and turn into the white wall of a refrigerator.

MY FATHER taught me fear, my mother escape. She escaped into books, any books, any words that could take her away from the ranting of her husband and the clamours of her many children. And in the thick of this, I learned to withdraw into myself. I could squint my eyes so that any light available— a chink of sunlight through the curtains, the glisten of baubles on a Christmas tree, the reflections of the moon through my bedroom window— could shift from their sharp and cruel clarity into

a blurry brilliance that took the edge off everything. When I opened my eyes again, they could offer the thrill of something new and exciting to help me escape the sound, sight, smell of my father and the prospect of his touch. I learned to disappear.

The Flood

DURING THE 1940s in Haarlem, Holland where his first babies were born, my father had read about the bringing up of children. He read Freud and Jung and Spock. But most of all he took in the teachings of Truby King, a medical doctor and psychologist, who developed what was called the Plunket system, which involved ‘controlled feeding’. By all means feed the baby well, Truby King taught, but after each feed put him down immediately, after the nappy change if necessary, and then do not pick him up again for at least four hours. Even if he cries, no matter how distressed. The baby needs to learn patience. He needs to learn to hold on. If you cannot bear it, close the door. No long hugs. In this way babies learn to disappear, even from themselves, from their inner torments. They learn to go into fast freeze. They learn that no amount of crying, no amount of calling out will get a response.

YEARS LATER my mother told us how she had shuddered outside the door, her heart aching with each sob from her baby’s room. She dared not go in. She waited and she prayed, ‘Let him fall asleep, dear God. Soon I can hold him again.’

IT WAS easier when my father was away at work or at war, and later when the other babies came along, including me. By then

my father had lost the energy needed to be a disciplinarian. By then he was past caring and it was easier for me to stay invisible. He lost interest in babies, yet expected heroic achievements from his sons as they grew. From his daughters he expected something else. Something unspoken.

My father arrived in Australia six months before the rest of his family on 17 September 1950, on the *SS Almkerk*. He wasted no time meeting up with my mother's brother who had arrived sometime earlier and together arranged for bed and board on the Hickling's chicken farm in Diamond Creek in exchange for weekend work. After the war, my father had wanted to work as a chemist in Holland but once in Australia he took whatever jobs he could. He worked as a builder's labourer and saved his earnings to buy a block of land on which to build his first home.

Before my mother arrived in Melbourne, pregnant, with four children following behind, the Hicklings had offered my parents the use of a derelict two-roomed incubator (a chook shed) as home. It was a long, rectangular building with a concrete floor, bare wooden walls, one entrance, one window at each end, sealed with fence wire and a galvanised tin roof. It was filthy with the stench of dead chickens and piles of chicken poop across the concrete floor. Yet my father managed to clean it, with the help of my older brothers. This chook shed was my first home.

Inside, my father hung three curtains to form a kitchen/living area, a tiny master bedroom and a larger area at the other end for the children's room, all six of us. We lived here until my father finished work on a house he built nearby in Arthur Street. This house was a pale blue weatherboard, Mary's blue, one among a row of neat houses, each similar in design, though painted a different colour and squatting among the eucalypts and wattle near Elder Street. On the front porch, my father had included an alcove to house the statue of the Virgin Mary, our own personal grotto. She was always there to greet you. And

visitors would know this house protected a Catholic family, one that took its faith seriously.

The front of the house looked out across a dusty road, full of potholes in summer and mud in winter, to unsown paddocks, filled with wild grasses that stretched to the horizon, interrupted only by a dark, ragged line of barbedwire fence or rippled by the wind. Sometimes a farmer might let loose his horse or set the cattle to graze. They scarcely made a dint in the sea of grass.

In Australia it was dry and hot. And although my mother told us the winters in Holland had been hard, she also loved them for the ice-skating she and her brothers enjoyed everyday on the frozen canals near to where they lived. How she missed her home and her parents.

There was a book in my father's library in the Greensborough house with a cover made up of a stretched black and white photo of swirling water. I could not read the story in Dutch but the pictures told me something terrible had happened. One day, when I was small, I asked my mother to tell me more.

She told me then about *de ramp*, the flood in Holland, which happened soon after my parents had arrived in Australia. In 1953, storms raced across Europe and broke down the dykes, those high walls that kept out seawater. In the book, you could see people lining up sand bags to build extra protection. But the sand bags were useless and large parts of Holland wound up under water.

My mother looked sad when she first told me this story. I shifted from her face and her distracted eyes to other pictures inside the book, of cows with bells around their necks stranded on high ground, of photos taken from above: roads under water, people in boats rowing past chimney-stacks and drowned horses in a field.

My father was different. He had no family he told us. No family to miss.

‘Look into my eyes,’ he said one day, as I sat upon his lap, begging him to tell me stories about his childhood.

‘Where are they now? Your parents, your brothers, your sisters? Where have they gone?’

‘I come from nowhere,’ my father said. ‘Look into my eyes, they’re black and evil!’

How could that be? I slid off his lap and into my bedroom, sobbing. I shook my fists heavenward, convinced my *Oma* who must be dead by now would hear me. If only my father’s family were not invisible, he might be different and I could come out of hiding. I was four years old and it felt wrong that my father should see himself as evil. Although his moods and formality frightened me, I had plans at that time to marry someone just like him, a tall Dutchman with fair hair and blue eyes who could speak several languages, build houses and drive a motor bike.

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