

GROWING UP WITH GERALDINE

A SISTER'S STORY

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My remembered life as Geraldine's sibling lasted ten years, from 5 (when we went to Australia to live) till 15 when she returned to New Zealand to be married. For the first six of those years she was just someone else around the house. For the next four I was acutely aware of my glamorous big sister.

I was envious and nasty, but also always admiring, always wanting this glorious goddess to notice me. Because that is indeed what my sister Geraldine grew into. While I was a gangling, skinny, red-nosed, buck-toothed brat, spoilt rotten by our indulgent mother, Geraldine was a gorgeous beauty of statuesque splendour and superb aplomb, brilliant at artwork and dressmaking and a good pianist who, unlike me, never seemed to make mistakes. The only thing I could do that Geraldine couldn't was sing. But that talent I didn't appreciate anyway – it was too easy for something to be proud of. It seemed to me that Geraldine was destined to marry a prince. It was surely just a matter of waiting for one to turn up.

The admiration for my big sister was carefully concealed from her. On the other hand, she was made painfully aware of my nasty side. In Williamstown I was known to climb through her bedroom window (her door being effectively locked against me) and make a frightful mess of the contents of her bookcase, strewing books all over her tidy floor. Horror piled on horror! I also scattered pepper on her pillow so that she would sneeze all night.

Geraldine tended to treat me as a trying but necessary nuisance around the place, and who can blame her? However, she did do nice things for me sometimes.

I remember she helped me win a prestigious school painting prize when I was about 13 and she was at Art School. She outlined my amateurish effort in thick black paint, freehand and with superb self-confidence. 'How could a little Third Former have won that competition?' my art teacher, Miss Chin, was asked. 'Oh', she replied, 'Dorothy Doorly is **Geraldine** Doorly's sister you know!'

She also once lent me her precious white silk Speech Day stockings to wear at a special do. She was probably furious but I now forget her rage.

After Mummy died she made me a handsome dark green velvet dress with a lace collar of which I was inordinately proud.

My earliest memories of Geraldine were in Dunedin. She practised nice pieces on the piano. She also wrote plays for her and her friend Ena Nyberg to perform with me and my friend Margaret Munro press-ganged in. Geraldine, tall and dark, always had to play the King to blonde Ena's Queen, (much to Geraldine's disgust), I was a prince and God knows what Margaret was. She wasn't much good anyway. We put on our plays in our box room at 816 George St. to an admiring audience of about six of Mummy's old lame-duck elderly friends, and took sixpence from each of them at the door. During one play I was passing time (naturally within full view of the audience) until my next 'entrance', rummaging through a cabin trunk of my mother's stage dresses. A pink silk dress which

had been meant for the Queen had mysteriously disappeared before ‘curtain’ and something else had to be found at the last minute for Ena to wear.

‘Geraldine!’ I shouted in the middle of the play, ‘Here’s the pink silk dress!’ The King looked pained but our audience enjoyed the episode.

Then it was Queenscliffe and Geraldine and me at the Convent, like the others placing our flower offerings in potted-meat jars at the feet of our statue of the red-lipped, pink and white Virgin. At a quarter to four each day Sister Bruno read out to the roomful of kneeling children a list of saints’ names after each of which we all dutifully cried for heavenly aid:

‘St Theresa of the Little Flower!’

‘PRAY FRUSS!!!’

But Geraldine, when sent one day by Sister Bruno to the Presbytery next door with a message for the Priest, refused to obey orders when she found herself on a collision course with the Archbishop of Melbourne taking the air on a meditation walk in the Priest’s garden. She had been told if she met him she must kneel down to kiss his ring. No way was Geraldine going to pander to such Papist idolatry. She climbed a tree instead.

Geraldine was dux of the school that year. At the school concert she and I played Hungarian Dance. She did the bass, I played the tune in octaves.

‘Mummy, wasn’t Dorothy awful! She showed off the whole time!’ cried Geraldine later.

And so I did too. Determined to impress the audience with my amazing skills, I played my bit looking out at the audience all the time. (What, no hands?)

I was indeed a little show-off and my sister felt it her duty to expose my vanity. I’m sure I deserved the complaints to my parents, but these episodes led to nasty reprisals like mess-in-the-bedroom and pepper-om-the-pillow.

In Williamstown we had friends nearby, Valda and Roma Wills. Valda and Geraldine were about 16, Roma and I about 11, when C-grade films came to be shown on Saturday nights at a hall down the road. It was a great period for Dracula-type horror movies and the legal regulation ‘Nobody between 6 and 16 admitted’ for certain ‘adult’ films was strictly enforced. Geraldine and Valda would be allowed to go to these movies, but only if they took their little sisters too. Our parents seemed to be in blissful ignorance of the grading of these films. Anyway, little Roma used to be dressed up by Valda in bobbysocks, very short skirt and bows in her hair to look like 6 and I, tall and skinny, used to be dressed up by Geraldine in something of hers plus grown-shoes and have my face made up to pass as 16. Off we would all go, and it seemed to work. Ah, the deliciously terrifying films Roma and I saw! I shall never forget the horrors of *The Mummy*.

One day my friend Mary Henderson was staying with us and she and I made a broom lady. We padded out and dressed up a broom, stuck a pull-down cloche hat on it and I painted a paper face. We fooled Mummy with it at the front door and nearly died of hysterics at her reaction to our strangely silent broom lady with the notice round her neck about being blind, deaf, dumb and a cripple with fourteen children to support. We pleaded to be allowed to set up our broom lady in the hall to confront Geraldine when she came home from a party late that night. We went to bed at 9 o’clock as usual, pinching each other to keep awake until midnight. When we heard someone at the front door

we hid behind the hall curtains and heard – to our ecstatic joy – an involuntary gasp of surprise from the dignified, queenly Geraldine! It only lasted a moment before she sized up our broom lady and muttered something about ‘those puerile children’ to herself before disappearing into her room. For a moment there had been a chink in my sister’s impenetrable, superior, self-contained armour. We had heard the gasp!

Geraldine was tall but also plump as a child and young adolescent. During her college years at Merton Hall she starved herself half to death (two apples only for lunch for years) and acquired a marvellous hour-glass figure. Voluptuous she was! She also often locked herself in her room for the day on a Sunday and came out at dinner-time in a marvellous new creation. She didn’t like it, though, when Miss Johnstone, full of admiration for her new ball dress which had a long, tube-like bodice, exclaimed: ‘Why Geraldine, you just look as though you’ve been poured into it!’ Nor did she appreciate it when the Assyrian Lady, a hawker of female underwear items who was a frequent ‘visitor’ (always at lunchtime though) to our soft-hearted mother’s house, came one day with a pair of pants for Geraldine.

‘I think of your beautiful daughter;’ she said to my mother, ‘and I make the bloomers beeg – BEEG!’

Geraldine was most insulted.

But she *was* beautiful. And she went dancing and yachting and golfing and did all sorts of exciting things, with young men, which dazzled me with envy.

Poor old scraggy - bones me! Would such wonders and delights ever happen to me too? I thought not. Geraldine was a goddess.

But the thing I admired most, I think, was her aplomb.

We had a naughty Irish terrier called Paddy – actually Geraldine’s dog. Paddy loved to go swimming at the beach with us. We would walk down to the beach, Geraldine and I, perhaps with a friend or so too, and set up a place for ourselves on the crowded sand with towels, beach umbrellas etc. where we intended to spend the next hour or so lying in the sun between bathes. People with dogs were expected to control them. Our Paddy was uncontrollable, flagrantly ignoring the orders of even his imposing mistress, Geraldine. He would pick a fight with another dog nearby at the drop of a hat and in no time protesting bodies would be leaping to their feet, trying to whip their gear away from the shindy going on, sand flying everywhere.

And what did my sister Geraldine do? She would sit calmly on her towel, gazing out to sea like the sphinx. Apologies? You’ve got to be joking! No way was my sister Geraldine going to be even connected with our Paddy.

It took me over fifty years to even begin to realise that if I wanted to I, too, could behave like a queen – and be treated as one!

Geraldine had already learned to be a queen at 16. And now she’s 80 and still a queen!

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