

An extract from AFTER ROMULUS by Raimond Gaita (Text Publishing, \$32.95)

An Unassuageable Longing

A year and a half after Hora died, his children Irina and Raymond, together with Raymond's wife Annette and their two children, came from Melbourne to Shalvah, our house in Central Victoria. They wanted to go with my wife, Yael, and me to visit Hora's grave in Maryborough and also to see the remains of Frogmore and the site of the labourers' camp where Hora, Mitru and my father were sent to live while they built Cairn Curran Reservoir. The reservoir was a two- or three-minute drive in the truck that took them from the camp. The site of the camp can be seen from Shalvah. The reservoir, too, is less than two kilometres from our house, hidden by a hill on which stands one of the largest granite boulders in the area, perhaps ten metres high, split down the middle. It was a camp only for men. With little else to do, the workers and their families when they visited on weekends often walked to that hill. The boulder was an obvious attraction. I have a photograph of my mother and me, when I was four, standing in front of it. She with her head to one side, turned slightly upward, in a pose struck by some models, distant, slightly dreamy, yet provocative.

At the cemetery, beside Hora's grave, Irina spoke movingly to the children of their grandfather and why we were there, what it meant for him to be in the grave, what it meant, indeed, to say that he was there. They did not understand—adults find it hard enough—but she spoke anyway, knowing that they must have wondered what it meant for their grandfather to be dead, to no longer be anywhere in the ordinary sense of 'being somewhere', yet to 'be' in a grave in Maryborough, making it important for us to go to it, to sit or stand by it and sometimes to tend it. There at the graveside we all talked of Hora and of Mitru, whose grave was next to his. Back at Shalvah, we talked of them again late into the night, sitting on the veranda, the landscape and our faces lit only by a full moon on a warm late-summer evening.

We spent the next day at Frogmore and at the site of the camp. In mid-afternoon they returned to Melbourne. An hour or so after they left I felt edgy, tense and very disturbed. On a hair-trigger, I provoked a quarrel with Yael later that evening. That made me even more agitated because we hardly ever quarrel. I walked out of the house to my car, but with no conscious intention to do so. Again with no conscious thought I drove to Frogmore. I climbed through the wire fence surrounding the remains of the house. From there, with no sense of what I was doing or why, I walked half a kilometre across a paddock, my feet crunching on the wheat stubble, almost white by the light of the moon, and lay down next to a log in a swamp area. As is often the case, there was no water in it.

More than fifty years earlier, a few days after she returned to Frogmore from the hospital in Maldon following a failed suicide attempt, my mother left the house without telling my father or me and spent the night in that same swamp, lying beside a log. As we had done on the night she tried to kill herself, we sought help from Tom Lillie, a neighbouring farmer who had a phone and a car. His son-in-law, who lived in Bendigo and who had come to stay overnight with Tom, put together a search party of locals and the Maldon police. He was dressed in city clothes and an overcoat, which struck me as strange. He organised things in a voice that made me protective of my mother. Tom was disdainful of her, and I heard the same tone in the voice of his son-in-law. She came back to the house (I cannot say she came 'home') the next morning. My father and I were hysterical with grief because we thought she lay dead somewhere in the paddocks, but she refused to tell us what she did that night or why. She told us only that she had stumbled over a log and cut one of her shins. She said that she had been demoralised and had slept the night beside the log. I doubt that she slept. Not even someone as psychologically and spiritually weary as she must have been could have slept in such a place. Searchlights pierced the cold, black night. Rescuers shouted to one another. Over them she must have heard my father calling 'Christel' and me screaming 'Muti'.

Standing knee-deep in another swamp only a kilometre away from the waterless one in which my mother lay, watching ten or so men search for her body, is one of the most searing of my childhood memories. I do not know why my father thought that she would try to drown herself in water that came, at its deepest, only to the knees of an adult. Perhaps it was because he was given to melodrama. Or perhaps he thought that having come back from hospital where sleeping tablets were pumped from her stomach, she had no more tablets with which to kill herself.

What was I doing, lying there that night, almost sixty years old, forty-seven years after my mother had killed herself? At the time I thought that I wanted to feel as she had, but could I really have believed that? Did I believe that I could abstract how that night might have felt for her—to be lying in the swampland of a desolate Central Victorian plain that she hated—from the context of her life and take it into my own life? How could I separate out her mental illness, the particular quality of her displacement, the fact that only days before she had tried to kill herself?

Psychological forces, strong and below the surface of consciousness, walked me to the spot where I lay, provoked into declaring themselves by the presence of Hora's grandchildren, one of whom was the same age that I was when I came to the camp, just over the hill from our house. Those forces were not seeking what I thought I was seeking.

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