Story for performance #257
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Tags: child/parent, countryside, animals, death, husband/wife, home
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I will tell you a story about an ordinary day. Neither the day nor the story is significant to any one who was not there but nevertheless it is a story.

This one takes place on a summer's day in the year of the Melbourne Olympics. All the people in the story attended the Games, members of a crowd, just one of many young families in the stands.

In the story I am very young, not yet born but still making my presence felt. What I can tell you is pieced together from fragments my mother told me and from stories my father told me. He told stories in such a way that they became my own memories. And there are parts that I believe because they ring clear in my dreams, make sense of the people I know.

Of course other things happened on that day, things of which I have no memory: New South Wales beating South Australia by an innings and 62 runs in a Sheffield Shield match; Ritchie Benaud scoring a duck on the first day, his humiliation sweetened by his team's victory. I am sure my father would have known that.

On this summer's day he listened to the radio and followed the match. Cricket was quite a thing in my family; sport as profound a spiritual experience as the Catholic faith. My mother became a Catholic to avoid a mixed marriage, but she didn't care so much for cricket. That is important, because this is really her story, this summer's day in the Victorian mountains.

Far away, the Native Patrol Officer wrote a report about aboriginal people at Woomera. In the report he made an interesting comment: 'placing the affairs of a handful of natives above those of the British Commonwealth of Nations…discloses a lamentable lack of balance in…outlook' But this suffering was far from my family and as in all ordinary stories we were caught in our day, our place, our singular grief.

My mother loved living there, in the mountain foothills. She loved the bush and everything that lived there (except for snakes that she would belt with a rake and the casein cow she never could catch). She would walk down the railway line carrying my brother while the white tom cat stalked behind. (A dreadful animal, it loved my brother and would hardly let him out of its sight.)

My brother had nearly stopped crying. For six months he had wailed, wailing from colic, she thought. So my mother carried him whenever he wailed, holding him close. When she wanted a shower, she would have to pump water from the tank. One thousand pumps. With my wailing brother under her arm.

On this December day it was school holidays, so my father held the wailing baby while she went to wash. As the water fell, she wondered about the flutter in her belly, how long it would last. Her sister the nurse was cross that she wouldn't lie down to make sure she hung on to her baby. I had to take my chances in there. She was like that. But I was stubborn and stayed in my mother's belly for nine months, then emerged in a shaggy shriek of rage (so I am told).

But on this day I was still a flutter determined to stay put. Out the window she could see the old cow, her milk, pure casein, scarcely digestible. Mr Cousins milked the cow. My mother would have slit its throat she says, but she couldn't catch it. I have never known an animal to avoid her but this cow did. It must have known better.

She heard my father pacing with the wailing baby as she rubbed herself dry. She heard the phone ring, my father answer. She heard him greet his mother, a woman with sacred heart icons, iron bedsteads and a marshy cold farm. She was reminded of her own mother riding in from delivering lunch. I felt her sudden grief keening. It washed over me in waves, drenched me in sorrow, as it had done since her mother died just after my brother was born, before I was conceived. But still I knew it. Again it caught her and spun me round, a circus embryo on her flying trapeze.

Then she was dressed, back in the kitchen.

My father threw the baby to her. My brother was laughing…he liked this game. My father looked smug, and tossed her a paper bag.

'Had she forgotten something important?'

She grabbed the bag before it hit the floor. Why was he giving her this present dressed in a paper bag?

It was the first time this would happen. But often this day would pass before she remembered. She would answer the phone. His mother always rang to congratulate them on their anniversary.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Annemaree Dalziel.