

ADAM AND THE FLOATING LADY

Bel Mooney



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Adam wakes very early, and listens. No slow rise from sleepy depths these days; instead the immediate shock of his skull bursting through the surface. His ears are reaching down the corridor, straining for the murmuring just out of reach. Some days the phone will ring, and the footsteps running to answer it will be too quick. Her voice will sound like the girls at school - the way they twitter in corners in the playground. Or high, hard and businesslike, when Daddy is around. There is urgency in the air, and even in this silent, grey hour he waits in fear.

But there is nothing to hear. A tap dripping. A creak. Hesitant birdsong in the gardens. The flat is silent, so he settles down again with Rabbit, holding the toy to his chest like a shield. Its fur smells of his own breath and skin and hair. The other day Mummy held the toy after kissing Adam goodnight and said if ever she went away she would have to steal Rabbit to remind her of Adam's scent.

'Don't be silly Mummy,' he said, smiling up at her.

'I'll try not to be,' she replied. Her face was serious and sad.

'Anyway, I'd miss Rabbit,' he added.

More than once Daddy pointed out that Rabbit is a silly name. 'Not very inventive, boy,' he said, his black eye brows meeting in the middle, 'Like calling a toy dog 'Doggie.' When I was your age my favourite toy was called 'Pegasus.' He went everywhere with me....'

'What was it?'

'A horse, of course!' He threw back his head and laughed, teeth white within the red mouth, the black circle of beard, 'What else would Pegasus be but a horse?'

'Don't laugh at the child, Jacob,' Mummy said sharply, 'He's far too young to know any mythology. We can't all be prodigies...'

'Pegasus was a horse with wings, Adam,' said Daddy, turning to look out of the window.

Adam was quiet, contemplating the mystery of a horse

that could fly. A few days later he drew Rabbit with wings sprouting from his back, and coloured the wings green. Then he thought for a few minutes, staring at the comic image of his toy with wings like lettuce leaves. He came to a decision and scribbled over them, so the rabbit looked as if it was being pursued by a pair of black clouds. Later Mummy found the ruined drawing on the floor and studied it with that serious look he loved.

'Darling, you drew a lovely picture of your bunny, then spoilt it,' he said, 'Why did you do that?'

'If Rabbit had wings he might fly away,' Adam explained, thinking she should have understood.

Mummy stared at him, her brown eyes so bright they make him drop his gaze.

Adam used to rush in to disturb them at this hour, even though his father's temper was terrible in the mornings. 'Too early, too early,' he would groan, 'Can't you get the child out of here, Eva? Can't a man get some peace?'

It was all right though; soon Adam learned to creep into the room and slide under the duvet beside Mummy who circled him to her arms, barely moving. Then he would go to sleep again, intoxicated by the musky smell that mingled with Rabbit's worn fur, and the warmth and softness of the big parental bed. Soon - too soon - he would wake again to morning chaos. His father seemed to fill the apartment as he

showered, searched for a particular shirt, complained about his wife's housekeeping and the strength of her coffee, shushed them while he listened to the news, demanded another piece of toast, and finally swirled out of the front door in the black overcoat, carrying his briefcase.

Then quietness folded back around them. Adam liked those times best, before school, when there was nobody but his mother and himself, as if they were enclosed in a bubble, glittering with all the colours of the rainbow, and yet indestructible. She helped him find his crayons and plimsolls, and handed him his lunchbox. Then they tucked Rabbit back into bed, 'to have a quiet day,' Mummy always said. She locked the door and they walked hand in hand. Her skin was always warm, even in winter. Each day the same. When it rained her tightened dark curls framed her face like a halo, glistening with moisture. She bent to kiss him goodbye, saying, 'Have a happy day, little frog!,' before catching the bus to the college where she taught art history part time.

'It's the story of paintings, Adam, ' she explained once, 'You know, pictures - and the men who made them.'

'But pictures go with stories.'

'Yes, but pictures tell stories too - all on their own. You don't always need words for a story. I'll show you.....'

Now he remembers that today is Saturday and they are going to see some paintings in the centre of London.

There was a long discussion about it, after he had gone to bed of course, but he listened. Daddy seemed angry, although why he should sound so fierce over an exhibition

Adam could not understand. They were arguing over the painter being Jewish. Daddy said it was important for any real understanding of his art. Mummy said that being Jewish didn't matter, that painting was beyond religion. Daddy said that religion was at the heart of everything, and how could she, a teacher, say something so stupid? Adam heard the sitting room door slam, then the sound of the bath running. Mummy didn't usually bathe so early in the evening. A silence settled on the flat. It deafened him. Under the duvet he buried his face in Rabbit's tummy, to keep it out.

Adam rises, and pulls on the navy trousers that are too short, and show his orange socks. He thinks they look silly, but Daddy said they would have to do for now. Adam thinks Daddy is mean. He is a doctor, and earns enough money to buy Adam some jeans like Joseph and David wear. They laughed at Adam's trousers at playtime yesterday, and challenged him to the whirlgig competition. This meant spreading your arms like wings, and whirling round and round on the spot until the universe caught you up in its centrifugal force and you felt you were flying, flying, the landscape speeding past in a blur, school buildings and trees merging into one - and then you lost balance and fell over. The last to

fall won. But Adam fell first, as usual, and blamed it on catching his foot in the hem of the too-short trousers.

Mummy comes into the room, opening his curtains in silence and pausing for a moment to gaze out before turning to say, 'It's a nice day, Addy - and we're going to the Royal Academy. Did you remember?'

He nods, struggling with his laces.

'Do you want to take Rabbit?', she asks, kneeling to help.

He looks down at the dark curls, closes his eye briefly, and says, 'No, not today.'

'Why not?'

'People'll think I'm silly. They'll think I'm still little. Anyway, I don't need him.'

'Ah..need,' she murmurs, half to herself, 'How do you know what you really need? Anyway, you are still little! All of us are little in a way. Needing things....'

'You're not little, Mummy!,' he laughs.

'Oh but I am,' she whispers.

Adam doesn't know what she means. Something in her voice and face makes him not want to know. So he asks, 'Mummy - do we have to go and look at these pictures?'

'Your father wants to,' she says crisply, 'and so do I.'

Breakfast is hurried. Daddy sits silently behind the Daily Telegraph, reaching for his coffee without lowering the paper. Mummy hovers, offering him a refill, asks if it's too

strong with no note in her voice of wanting to know. She placates him, and yet the turn of her head is indifferent, bored. Her tone reminds him of something uncomfortable. She's just like him when he plays with Joseph and David, trapped in the habit of wanting to please - wanting things to be all right. He hopes she will not spin around in the kitchen, arms spread out like wings, faster and faster, until she falls over.

The tube from Stanmore to Green Park is direct. They find seats and watch as the compartment fills. At last Mummy takes him on her knee, to let a woman carrying a big bag sit down. As he leans back, her arms tighten around his waist.

'Who's my little boy?' she murmurs in his ear. 'Tell me.'

'Me!' Adam whispers, watching the young couple opposite, sitting with faces close, until their nuzzling and little kisses embarrass him and he jerks his head back towards Mummy.

'And will you always be my little boy?' she asks harshly, squeezing him so tightly he finds it hard to breath.

'Course I will,' he says quickly. Yet he realises she is staring across at the couple, not listening.

He looks along the compartment to where Daddy is hunched over his book, navy peaked cap like a beak, his lips pink and wet against his beard. Suddenly Adam feels sorry for this gaunt man who swirls around every morning, driving

him and Mummy into their own little compartment by the force of his tempest. He looks thin and lonely down there. He looks as if the train could stop, letting them alight, and he would not notice - travelling on alone forever.

They get off at last at Green Park, and walk towards the Royal Academy. Adam stares up at the tall, handsome buildings, feeling tiny and afraid. It must be because of the grey metal figures standing, sitting, lying around - like dead people, or ghosts. Mummy points them out and tells him they are sculptures. Adam wonders if they come alive at night and dance here in the courtyard. They remind him of people in his dreams, strangers, hiding behind doors and threatening things he does not understand.

So many people streaming into the building, and everybody so big. Mummy and Daddy walking without speaking, each absorbed in some inner story for which there are no pictures - or none Adam can draw. He can still feel the pressure of her arms around his ribs, clinging so hard. There is an early memory at the edge of his mind.... what was it? He feels he might have been in a pram or pushchair, looking up, and there are two faces laughing down at him, then stopping to embrace in the street, until she laughs, 'Stop it, darling - you're squashing my ribs!' In the pram you feel so safe.

But Daddy strides a pace in front of them, as grey and

metallic and dead as those figures, so that if you raised you fist to hit him he would surely clang. Mummy holds Adam's hand, and tells him things about the painter whose name, Chagall, is on the posters. She says he paints a world which is like our world and yet not - a world where cows, donkeys and people can fly high above the town.

'Like Rabbit,' Adam says.

'Rabbit?

'If he had wings.'

She frowns. Adam looks up and sees her eyes are distant. For the first time in his life he realises that the hand holding his is not really there; it belongs to the shadow of his mother. There is nothing there, and he is afraid.

'Mummy?'

'What is it, darling?' She looks down, almost surprised, as if she has only just recognised the little boy on the end of her arm, the child who is part of her.

'Uh....Will I like the pictures? What story will they tell?'

'Oh, it's a happy story - really,' she said in a tone that belied her words.

They had caught Daddy up now, standing in the short queue, his book sticking out of his pocket, his cap shading his eyes from the sunlight.

'It's a good job we came early,' says Mummy.

'The artist - this man Chagall - designed a theatre in Russia,

a Jewish theatre,' Daddy tells him, as if she had not spoken. 'It was really important step for our people. It told them - this is who we are.'

'Why didn't they know?' Adam asks.

'Don't you worry. You just look at the colours,' Mummy says quickly, 'and think of the pictures as magic. They tell you anything can happen - if you want it enough.'

'Anything?' Daddy asks, looking at her as if he would burn her up.

'Maybe. Most things. But sometimes you have to make...the magic yourself,' she replies calmly.

'Oh, I'm sure,' he says, nodding at her.

Daddy pays for the tickets. Adam is conscious of such a desire to run it makes him dizzy for a second, but he is caught between them and shuffles with all the people who have come to see Chagall. Inside the rooms seem dark. People lower their voices; it reminds Adam of the synagogue. Is God here? Can he be there, in that strange little moon-face over there? Surely not. Adam darts across the room and back, like a bee zig-zagging over the flowers, barely stopping to taste.

'Now, Adam, ' says Daddy. 'You have to stop and look at each picture properly.'

'And then I want you to tell me which one is your favourite,' Mummy adds, 'but only once you've really looked at them

all.' She pauses. ' Like your father says.'

'Really look,' says Daddy.

Adam gazes up at them both. They tower over him, two dark heads in the half-light of this room, the pools of colour on the walls out of focus as he is fixed by the intensity of their gaze. Suddenly he feels he does not know them. Why are these strange people so serious? Why are they telling him what to do, with such set faces - as though looking at paintings by the man Chagall is a punishment?

Perhaps it is.

He follows them, and they stop in front of a painting of a bearded man sitting before a mirror in a blue room.

'Look Daddy - it's you! he looks just like you!,' Adam shouts in glee.

'Uncle Zuzzy - the Barber's shop,' Mummy reads, smiling.

And there's another one of you, over there, Daddy!,' Adam crows, pointing across the room to where a bearded, caped figure, a silhouette almost, floats over the snowy town, stick in his hand, bundle over his shoulder.

'Ah - so that's how the child sees me,' Jacob murmurs, looking at his wife, 'What is it? The bogeyman? Is that what you're telling him, Eva?'

'I'm telling him nothing,' she says wearily, turning away.

Then to Adam, 'See the little houses? Vitebsk was the town Chagall lived in, where he painted the walls and ceiling

of the famous Jewish theatre.'

'Adam - go and find your picture now,' says Daddy, giving him a little shove, 'And for heaven's sake take your time about it.'

Adam runs away. He hopes people aren't noticing his orange socks and the too-short trousers. A part of him wishes he had brought Rabbit, zipped into his anorak - because then he would have someone to talk to. Perhaps he can summon him - magic him - just by closing his eyes and concentrating hard. Trying to summon up the comfort of old fur. Come in Rabbit, come in Rabbit.....

'Look Rabbit,' he says inside his head, stopping in front of a picture of an enormous yellow-brown clock, its pendulum swinging wildly towards a solitary, tiny man who sits gazing wistfully from the window, as if everything he wanted was out there in the darkness, out of reach. 'That's a picture of me in the morning in a few years time, when I won't want to go to school. But I know I'll be late. That's what the clock is saying. And by that time, you'll be, you'll be.....Oh Rabbit.'

He looks back to find his parents, panicking for a second because he can't see them. Rabbit has disappeared too. In a second of terrible emptiness, Adam wonders if he will ever find him again. The rooms are filling up. On Saturday people like to go to galleries and look at things that

tell them stories, Mummy says.

But what stories? Wandering on, he sees his mother at last, standing rapt in front of a painting as blue as the hottest summer sky he has ever seen. A shadowy woman is kissing a man, her gloved hand up to his face. Next to it hang the two lovers again, green this time, and wearing hats; their mouths so near, so near, about to kiss. He looks around. There are more, and his mother - his own mother - is the stranger who wanders from one to the other and back again, staring as if she would - by an act of will - slide down her own gaze into the world of intense colour and light and love. And suddenly Adam sees that the woman in the paintings IS Eva, his mother. The short dark curly hair. The black eyelashes and alabaster cheeks. So beautiful.

But who is the man who leans his head on her breast in that painting? He has no beard. The beard belongs to Uncle Zuzzy in the barber's shop, and the dark Daddy bending over the town like a black crow. The man in these paintings is as clean-shaven as an angel. Adam walks across the room to ask his mother about the paintings, but Daddy is there first. Mummy jumps. The dreamy look vanishes from her face. She looks hunted, as though caught committing a crime.

'Very romantic, eh, Eva?'

'He was so in love with his Bella,' she says flatly.

'Oh, luurrrve - why yes, I think I remember it,' says Jacob Levin, passing his hand over his eyes, 'But for Bella it was 'til death do us part, wasn't it - Eva? Wasn't it?'

'Don't,' she says, 'please don't.'

'And you tell me he isn't even Jewish? Dear God, Eva....How could you?'

Adam is there at his elbow and says, 'But you said Chagall was Jewish, Daddy. You told me....'

'I thought I told you to go and find your favourite picture,' says Mummy, her face contorted suddenly, jagged and hard, so that she no longer looks like the serene lady in the jewel paintings, 'Why don't you do as you're told?'

Adam turns away. In his chest is a hole, filling with water like an underground cave. He does not understand what he has done to make them angry. The pictures mean nothing to him; they do not look like anything he knows. How can he pick a favourite in this strange new world? Yet he knows he must please her, so that her face will return to that serene expression it wore looking into the mirror image of those pictures of the dark woman and the man she loves. He must make her look like that. He know it is in his power. It must be in his power.

Yet he is lost in these sombre rooms. Walking on, trying to find a way, he notices a picture of a bride and groom, embracing each

other, with an angel in red hovering above them, pushing their heads together. Ah yes - this means something to him. He decides this must be the picture and turns back to find Mummy to show her. She must like it; it is a wedding; it will make her happy.

He goes back to where he left them, but now they are sitting on the bench in the middle of the room, their heads close together, talking and waving their hands. Daddy looks angry, Mummy so sad. She hangs her head. Now she is shaking it from side to side, like sometimes in the rain, when her halo glistens. And yet he thought they both wanted to come and look at these paintings. Why would you chose to do something that would make you both unhappy?

He creeps up behind them, and listens.

'I warn you, you won't have a chance,' says his father, jabbing at her knee with his bony forefinger.

'But I'm the mother,' she whispers.

'Ha - what kind of mother? If you persist in this....I tell you Eva, I'll use all the skill at my command.'

'My son the lawyer,' she sneers, 'Your mother so proud of you.'

'I sang kaddish for your father,' he says, with a quiver in his voice Adam has never heard, 'But if he'd lived to see this day he'd say there'd be no rejoicing ever again on the earth. Your mother too. You shame them....'

'I found a picture!' Adam says, and they both turn round in a rush, 'Can I show you, now?'

His parents exchange warning glances, and rise with the unspoken agreement of those who have been married for some years and cannot unlearn the habit of doing things together, no matter how much they want to.

'Come,' says Daddy, holding out his hand.

This is novel, this hand - harder and bigger than Mummy's, gripping Adam's where her hand softly enfolds. But Adam takes it, glad beyond words. He leads the way into the room which contains his picture, conscious of his mother trailing a few paces behind. Then he stops.

'There!'

In silence they contemplate the image of the married couple and the angel pushing them together. Nobody speaks, until Adam asks, 'Why has she got a tiny person drawn on her cheek?' - noticing it for the first time. Mummy says nothing. It is as if she has lost the power of words, something choking in her throat. She turns her face awkwardly to one side, as if afraid.

His father still holds on to Adam's hand, more tightly now, so it hurts. 'I think that must be a way of saying she'll have a baby in the future - a son. Like you, Adam. And see the little house down there in the corner, with the table set? That's their happy home. See? See? Look, Eva, I'm showing

the child - it's the bride and groom and their happy home.'

Adam pulls his hand away with a tiny 'Ow!' sound. But his father doesn't notice. Daddy is staring at Mummy now, who is flinching from the painting just as you turn your face from a flame that roars too high. She is singed by the heat of the red angel who is pushing at her head. Adam can see the pain in her face.

'Love each other - go on- love each other forever' says the angel in Adam's head.

'So - is this your favourite painting?' Daddy asks.

'No!,' says Adam, and runs away.

He starts to whirligig, arms stretched so wide they hurt. Round and round, tottering slightly, and bumping into a woman in her forties, older than Mummy, who lays a gentle hand on his shoulder and says, 'Oops - careful, sweetheart.' He looks up at her shyly, feeling silly. She has blue eyes, bright and clear, not dark and veiled like his mother's eyes.

'I'm sorry,' he whispers.

'You might fly into a painting!' she smiles, and goes on her way. Adam looks after her, as if the kind stranger might have offered some protection.

But really he wants to be dizzy. He wants to be in the playground with Joe and Dave and all the others, even if they make fun of him because he is small and his clothes don't fit because his mother isn't interested in shopping -

less and less nowadays, spending so much more time at the college... as if...as if.... all life is there. But why does he remember that, going round and round? Oh, to be in the playground, to be falling over, with them all laughing at him, that noise drowning out the other sounds at home, overheard dimly down the corridor. To be there, not here. He wants to escape from those paintings that made his mother happy - the ones of the two people in love.

He spreads his arms again, and pretends to be an aeroplane this time. Inside his head is a high pitched whine of engines as he takes off and gains altitude, and then dive-bombs each painting with a low ker-rumpp. An ecstasy of flames! The sound of his engine gets louder, drowning out the murmuring people all round him, some of them with notebooks, some carrying big books of the pictures on the walls...

Then, all at once, he sees the floating lady. In one picture she is lying across the whole sky wearing a blue dress, her arm stretched out as if showing the way to that same man, as they hover weightless over the little grey, red and yellow houses. But that's not the best one. No - in the one he likes most she looks so happy, in fluttering cherry pink and little boots, floating in the sky but still holding tightly to the man's hand as he walks in fields so green dear old Rabbit could eat every brushstroke and think it was

lettuce. And the pink church behind, like a flower....So many promises in this picture. How joyful they look! Her hand is resting lightly on his hand, as if she were an acrobat, but they trust each other totally, and he bears her weight as if it were a rainbow bubble, blown by a child's lips.

This is the picture his mother told him to find. This is the one that will please her, especially when he tells her that the lady reminds him of her, his hand resting in her hand just like that, when they walk to school - although of course she is not floating above fields then. People would stare! No, she is right there beside him, so that he does not need to grasp. It will please her to know that her magical Chagall painted her even though he didn't know her - she who is so beautiful anyone who sees her must love her.

Mummy.

Adam turns to find his parents. He walks purposefully, but it's as if they have hurried on in an attempt to lose him. Surely not...Yet fear nips the corners of his heart. He strides more quickly now, past the strange handsome blue angel surprising the lady at the easel, who also looks like Mummy. Past the group of men who look like Daddy, bent over their books - all so serious - just as he bends over his at night, always bringing his work home. Past the green horse, and the two headed goat. And then...yes, the strangeness of the green-faced man playing the violin, and the fat dancer.

In the old days Mummy would have laughed, he knows that. She would have told him stories about music and the stage, and how the animals flew because the artist's mind gave them wings. 'Why don't you have wings to fly with...' She used to sing him that folk song at bedtime. He can hear her voice now, so sweet inside his head, making him sick with longing. It was about a calf on a wagon, going to market 'with a mournful eye,' and a swallow soaring high in the sky above it. 'How the winds are laughing...They laugh with all their might.....' The song told him that calves are easily bound and killed, but those who want to be free would learn to fly - must learn to fly.

'Donna, donna, donna, donna....' , she crooned, the chorus lulling him to sleep.

It was a horrible song, and this is a horrible-place - the pictures garish, the moon-faced lovers mocking him. Where are they? Why didn't they wait? Why doesn't she sing any more?

At last he sees them, standing in front of some funny yellowish drawings he doesn't like very much. And Adam instinctively rises on his tip-toes, so his shoes will not squeak, and stands behind them. Daddy's hand is gripping Mummy's arm, the knuckles white. She stares at him, her face as chalky as Chagall's lady with her lover.

Daddy gestures towards the large caption on the wall,

telling what this group of stage designs is called, and says, 'Mazeltov. Mazel - tov. God knows you'll need it, Eva.' His mouth is a twist of wire.

'I know,' she says, 'But Jacob, please... Adam.'

'You make your choice,' he replies, his voice as harsh as Adam's teacher's when the boys have been naughty, 'It's the law in every sense, Eva. You have to take the consequences. You'll be judged - as we all are.'

'What can I do? I just.....' Her voice breaks, 'Ohh, it's such a disease, this love, this needing. What can I do? I tried, I really tried, but he's.....'

Adam wants to dance like the fat blue lady with the apron in the picture just to one side. Mummy loves him and she needs him - that's what she is saying. And he thought she was angry with him. He thought he had done something wrong!

Yet...if she loves him - why is she crying now, not caring who can see? People are staring at her, but she does not notice.

'I love him so,' she hisses, as if all the pain and sin and suffering in the world is escaping in this desperate, whining sound.

Daddy removes his cap with a sweep, and runs a hand through his hair, looking old suddenly, and broken, although his tone is as firm, as implacable as ever. 'Eva, I'm your husband, but I'm past caring now. You want to go, you

go...But don't ask me to explain it to the child. And don't expect me to give you the child either.'

At that moment Mummy turns and sees him. Adam stares up at her without speaking, and she gazes back shocked, her mouth open slightly, her face puffy and wet. She isn't pretty any more. Then he swings round, running. Behind him he hears her shrill voice calling, 'Did you find a painting, Addy? Show me your favourite....'

But he doesn't wait. He races back to the room and stops in front of the floating lady in the pink dress. And Adam wings himself out to begin the whirligig - round and round, faster and faster, pushing himself, not caring if he falls over, until the room is a blur all around. The world is shifting. There is no balance anymore.

At last he stops, as he must. He reels, standing in front of the picture, arms still outstretched, though quivering now. He stares at the pretty pink lady, whose dress flutters in the breeze, and notices something new. The hand he thought was clasping the man's hand is merely resting there, so gently. There is probably a wafer of balance between them. No grip. And as the room shifts, he turns a couple of times more, just to punish himself.

'Stop Adam!' a voice cries, somewhere in the distance.

And stop he does, swaying, trying to focus. Then he sees the painting itself move and come to life. The green

fields pulsate, the houses are cracking open and the pink church flickers as if on fire. And Adam realises that she is not floating on that smiling man's hand at all. The space between the hands grows before his eyes - and that pretty dark-haired lady is flying away.



NB: see - 'Promenade' by Marc Chagall

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