



The Somervilles of Marsh Street

a short story
by Graham Price

It was called Marsh Street because there was a swamp at the southern end of it. Sheila and her brothers, Danny and Percy, often played down there, skimming flat stones off the water and frightening the birds. Sometimes old Mrs Hart from number 13 came and sat on the grass verge with them, bringing her folding chair and an easel. She painted water colours of the water birds and scenery, which according to the children's mother, Annabelle, the old lady sold in the big city when she took the trip once a month. It was a way of maintaining a livelihood, for Gerda Hart was a widow.

The Somerville children lived in 10 across the street and had known the old lady for as long as any of them could remember. It was a small street, cut down from a curving main road and because of the swamp was a cul-de-sac. No vehicles could pass through, though it was rare for anyone to see a strange car turn in, kind of lost off the main road. Marsh Street seemed a lonely kind of street from an outsider's point of view, but in reality it was a hub of association — the neighbours had considerable care for each other and often held charity drives for those less fortunate in the town. Times were tough; the long drought had affected local farmers harshly and everything was economically unstable.

Being on the edge of town, Marsh Street was the only habitable street for a mile or more — to the east was farmland and to the west behind the houses loomed dense bush forest, filled with eucalyptus, spindly paperbark trees and numerous ferns. The street was quiet too, rarely filled with the noise of a prop plane from the civilian airport on the other side of town, the railway being there as well. Tourist steam trains still ran occasionally, but diesel electrics were the go these days. Annabelle took the children into the big city once or twice a year, so that they would not lose touch with that other life — where there were shopping malls, fairs and cinemas and large cafes and restaurants. Once, Sheila saw one of Mrs. Hart's paintings in an art shop window.

"Look at that, mum," said the thirteen-year-old, it's \$550. Wow!"

Annabelle stopped and stared at the painting for a while. "Oh, that's unusual. She told me she never got much more than \$30 for her paintings. But yes, that's her signature at the bottom. So, strange."

"They are brilliant, though, aren't they mum?"

Annabelle Somerville thought so, but she simply nodded and moved on. That night she mentioned it to her husband Damien, but he laughed it off and said she must have been mistaken. It was someone else's painting. After all, Mrs. Hart was as poor as a church mouse, couldn't even afford decent clothes for herself, said Damien. . . has cardigans with darns in them, and she wears scruffy old shoes that have seen better days.

"And remember last winter. . . she didn't even have a decent coat to go to that civic thing you all went to in town. . . and you gave her one of yours. And then there were your sister's boots and that scarf that she sent out from Sydney. And the house, it's a bit of a shambles. Hasn't seen a good paint in twenty years or so. Her painting at \$550! Don't be daft."

Annabelle found it difficult to get off to sleep that night. Damien had gone off on night shift to his job as a security guard in the town and wouldn't be back until after dawn. She thought she would have dropped off to sleep easily for it had been a tiring day out in the back garden, making sure it was well weeded and kept clear of insect pests. The chook run needed a good clean-out too, but her back was aching somewhat, so that could wait until another day. Eleven o'clock and Sheila and the boys were asleep at the rear of the house. Annabelle worried about Sheila, who was now attending high school in the town, traveling to and fro by bus. The boys, Danny 9 and Percy 7, were still in primary and were taken and returned by Steven Singh's wife, Maria, from number 5. There had been a murder in the town last year — a fourteen-year-old girl from the same high school as Sheila's, who had been found on a country road out of town, badly beaten. So far, the police had not arrested anyone and the case was ongoing. Annabelle tried not to think about it too much, but it was there. . . it was always there. . . and no one seemed to be doing anything about it. She had cried for the girl, cried deeply over many weeks, because Annabelle had known the girl's mother when she herself was a teenager in that school. And now, she worried over Sheila.

But that night it was the incongruity concerning the painting that kept her awake longer than usual. How could Gerda Hart be getting prices like that for her paintings when she insisted she was only getting peanuts? And if she was getting good money, where was it going? She was still accepting hand-out clothes from the neighbours. As Damien said. . . poor as a church mouse. One good thing, though, Annabelle thought . . . restlessly turning in the bed. . . Gerda had taken Sheila under her wing and had begun to teach her how to paint, with Sheila coming back from number 13 every week after lessons, smiling and



laughing, sometimes with the results to show her parents. There is talent there, thought Annabelle, Gerda is doing well with my little fluffy kitten. And I think it is also good for Gerda, bringing her out of herself. She's always been a kind of shy person, and somewhat gloomy since her husband passed on, but these days the trips down to the swamp with the children seem to have livened her somewhat. Gerda and her husband Henry were not local born Australians, in fact, Annabelle didn't really know where they were from. . . somewhere in Europe she guessed. They'd been here so long, long before the Somerville's moved into 10. How old was Gerda? Annabelle didn't really know. Late 60's perhaps, early 70's, but smooth of complexion and hair that possibly was dark once, now a stunning white. . . a clear and clean white, thought Annabelle, no yellow streaks, and not even a whisper of grey. Unlike me. A few grey hairs showing when I looked in the mirror the other day. I must get myself to a hairdresser next week.

She wished Damien's night shifts would soon be over. She needed someone beside her during these nights — someone to talk to before she turned out the lamp beside the bed, to get things off her chest. She needed his comfort and his reassurance that Sheila would be okay. After all, the bus at the end of the street took her right past the school, so really, where was the harm to come from? But it was there. . . it was always there. . . this fear of the stranger out of control. . . the stranger who could take your child away from you in an instant. And then the searching, the waiting, the needing to know where she was. . . how she was. . . the hoping against all hope that she was safe. Oh, it was all too much. She turned again in the bed. Shouldn't have had that cup of coffee earlier! Can't sleep. She turned on the bedside lamp and took the book that was next to it. Might read for a while to settle myself. It was Alain de Botton's *Essays In Love*, published only a year ago in 1993. Her sister in Sydney, Merle, had given it to her for her thirtieth birthday. She found it to be a very comforting book and had poured herself into its chapters when she had the quietness of the house to herself. It was about Botton's love for Chloe, their synchronous meeting, the excitement and charm of an affair and their eventual separation. But Annabelle had not reached that separation part and was not yet aware that it had come to that. Her bookmark was stuck at the chapter headed *The Fear of Happiness*, and she began to read. 'One of love's greatest drawbacks is that, for a while at least, it is in danger of making us seriously happy.'

Was she happy? Was she still in love? She leant back on the pillow and considered that for a moment. After bearing three children and settling into a routine way of life, perhaps love could never be the same. . . and Damien's love-making in bed was out of all proportion to what it was when they first met and found themselves in the blissful state of young love. Could they regain that bliss, that heavenly state of intoxication that overcame them whenever they had been away from each other for even a few hours? They could hardly keep their hands off each other.

She laughed, a small bubbling sound that was more of a giggle. It was good to remember. Perhaps they could regain how it was in those days before the children came along? She turned back to the book. Alain and Chloe were visiting in Spain and Chloe came down with a sickness, which a Spanish doctor had diagnosed as *ambedomia*, being common with holiday makers. So, given a few pills and rest, she'd be fine. 'Eet is nutting,' said the doctor. The British Medical Association had diagnosed it as a mountain sickness brought on by sudden terror in the face of a threat of happiness.

I don't believe it, thought Annabelle. . . but then, perhaps! Perhaps the pursuit of happiness and the fear of happiness belonged to the same tree? But what is happiness, anyway? She put the book down and thought. I don't know. . . I really don't know. She glanced at the alarm clock. . . well after midnight. Better try and get some sleep. Although the next day was Saturday, the boys had gym training and Sheila early piano lessons with Maria Singh, the lovely Indian lady who often brought her delicious curries to Annabelle. Then there was the small farmer's market just off the main road that she needed to get fruit and veggies from. Get in early before the good stuff was gone. Anyway, Damien would be home by 7.30, so she'd better try and get some rest.

The coolness of autumn had now turned into winter and the gravel road in Marsh street began to become somewhat slushy. A farmer sometimes used it to gain access to the rear of his property and the tractor left large patterns in the mud that reminded Annabelle of the old convicts' arrows on their garments. Well, that was her theory, anyway, from the books she had read. Stripes more likely. She and Gerda were having a cup of tea in Gerda's kitchen and the wind was whistling through cracks in the timber walls and around the edges of the window frames. Annabelle shivered. "Aren't you cold, Gerda? Perhaps you should light the fire in the living room?"

Gerda gave a tight smile. "Oh no, this shawl is enough for me. I've always been used to the cold, especially back in the old country. But if you like, I can put the electric heater on."

"No, no, that's not necessary. I was just thinking that. . . you know, you're no spring chicken anymore, Gerda, and you need to take care of yourself more. Oh, the old country, where was that?"

Gerda looked at the ceiling, then dropped her eyes to the cup of tea in her lap. "I don't wish to talk about it. It's so long ago."



“Sorry, didn’t mean to pry.”

Gerda nodded. “Oh, you don’t pry. That’s one thing I really like about you, Annabelle, you don’t pry. But. . . but. . . it’s all so long ago, and as they say, the past is another country. I prefer to leave it where it belongs. Living is for today.”

Annabelle changed the subject. “Sheila is doing very well under your tuition. I think we should be paying you for that.”

“Heaven’s no, for goodness sakes, no. . . never. She’s such a lovely child and the opportunity is there for her to go on to great things. Henry and I never had children, though I would have liked. But he had some fear in him of little ones. I think it. . .” She stopped then and Annabelle noticed the glistening of the eyes and thought she saw a tear appear.

Gerda went on. “If we’d had the opportunity, I would have loved a child like your Sheila. She is so caring. One day she will make a good wife for some fortunate man. I know that.”

Annabelle laughed. “Whoa. Let’s not get too far ahead. She’s only just entered her teens.”

“Well,” said Gerda, “There’s that handsome young farmer’s son. I saw him looking at her with something a lot more than attraction the other day. He’s fifteen or sixteen, might be a good match later on. Did you know she winked at him?”

“What? Oh, just teenage silliness. Besides, for all I know she might have a crush on some of the boys at the high school she goes to. Did you know I once went there?”

“Is that where you met Damien?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. But he was such an awkward young thing. Couldn’t get his feelings out without stammering. Fortunately, he got over that when there was competition from several of the other boys.”

“So, you knew him from all those years. A teenage romance?”

Annabelle gave a small chuckle. “Yes, but you’re not going to suggest that Sheila is ready for anything like that, are you?”

“More tea? Oh, you never know my dear, the heart is a very efficient machine, but it does have a defect.”

“Yes, more tea, thanks. And just what is that defect, Gerda?”

Gerda stood up and swung her shoulder-length white hair. Her eyes had taken on a gleam. “It’s always. . . always searching for happiness, even under the most trying and horrific circumstances.”

And Annabelle wondered why searching for happiness should be a defect, and what those horrific circumstances might be.

On Sunday the Somerville’s had gone to church — to St. Paul’s Anglican, which was one of four churches in the town, the others being Catholic, Presbyterian and Uniting. Damien had originally been Presbyterian but had changed to Anglican when he and Annabelle married. He didn’t always attend, thinking that there was a little too much pomp and ceremony similar to the Catholic church, but when he did he found it enjoyable and loved singing the hymns. Sheila often said to him “You’re only half a Christian, dad,” laughing as she did so. At those times he grabbed her and tickled her ribs until she cried “I take it back,” with laughing tears rolling down her face. Later, she would run past and slap him on his behind, yelling out “Love you, dad.” And she did. He was tall, lean, and handsome — had come out of the army as a sergeant in the 80’s to find that Annabelle was still around and still unmarried. There was no doubt that she was still in love with him and it was only a matter of months before they were engaged, and six weeks after that married. There wasn’t much work in the town but he had taken on security which was a natural for him and had enough from his army pay to put a deposit on the house in Marsh Street, which they both considered a bargain. It was 1930s vintage, as were all the homes in the street, needed some considerable repairs and a paint, which he and Annabelle had attended to. It’s best feature was the rear yard, large enough for plants, trees, and a chook run.

“Why doesn’t Mrs. Hart go to church?” piped up Percy, as they were driving back in the somewhat rusted Holden.

Annabelle turned to look at him and the others in the rear seat. “That’s really none of our business, Percy.”

“I suppose,” said Damien, “That she doesn’t have that kind of belief.”

“How many kinds of belief are there, dad?” queried Danny.

“Can we wait until we get home, dad’s trying to concentrate on driving,” said Sheila.



“Oh that’s okay, I can talk while driving.”

Danny rapped his knuckles against the car window. “You sure can talk, dad, like you’re always talking to Mrs Singh. Did you know they were Catholic? I thought they’d have to be Hindu.”

Annabelle laughed. “You kids know too much for your own good. Where do you get this stuff from, surely not from me or your father.”

“It’s that mad teacher they got in primary school, mum. You know, the one with all that hair and the beard,” said Sheila.

“You mean Mr. Munroe? Oh, don’t be crazy, he’s a lovely man.”

“Well, I think he’s weird.”

“Sheila! That’s not like you. Why do you say that?”

“Well, when I was there, he used to touch the girls on the arms and one day he touched me on the neck and said that I’d soon be a woman. And he would ask the boys about their hygiene in front of us girls. I just didn’t think it was right.”

Annabelle had gone cold. She felt frozen to the seat and simply stared out of the windscreen, and the silence from Damien was murderous. His hands squeezed the steering wheel as if any second he could break it into pieces.

That afternoon, though it was cold and windy, the sun came shining through and Gerda Hart had set up her easel by the swamp. The children had joined her, with Sheila sitting cross-legged with a large drawing pad on her knees. Danny and Percy were running about kicking a football and Gerda decided to include them in her painting. The scene with water birds frolicking in the background began to take shape, with Sheila watching and attempting to copy with crayons. Around three o’clock after the boys had wandered back home, Gerda decided it was enough and began to pack up her items. Sheila helped, taking the box of paints under her arm as they walked back along the road.

“Come in for a nice hot cuppa,” said Gerda as they reached the picket fence of number 13.

Inside, they talked and sipped their tea. Sheila was in the mood for conversation. “We have this group at school, well it’s nothing official like, but we study astrology and it’s amazing how it fits into modern life. It’s all about numbers and I have this incredible string of numbers that keeps appearing. Like 13, for instance, your house, my age now, and seven and nine.”

Gerda smiled and patted Sheila’s arm. “I’d be a little careful with that. You know, there was a man who also lived by what his astrologers said, but in the end it only brought him trouble.”

“Oh, who was that, then?”

“A man called Adolph Hitler.”

Oh, him. But I don’t see what that has to do with our little group. Anyway, I want to get a tattoo of those numbers. Some of the other girls have had theirs done, some on their bum where their parents won’t see it. It makes us all one, don’t you see. We need to be close to each other and wherever we go in the future, it will help us to remember our group.”

Gerda sat still, with the smile remaining on her face, though it now seemed somewhat taut. “I was part of a group many years ago, and yes, I also have a tattoo that makes me remember that group. But, dear Sheila, sometimes I do not wish to remember. It is always there, wherever I go it is always there.”

Sheila gasped. “You have a tattoo. . . how lovely! May I see?”

Gerda took another sip from the cup, put it down on the saucer, and Sheila noticed that Gerda’s fingers trembled a little. “Yes, you may view my tattoo. You see, it also is about numbers, for without numbers there is no order. Without numbers there is only confusion. You cannot have a herd of sheep or cattle without numbers, without knowing what you have, and so, certain tattoos always remind you that you are part of a numbered group. . . that you have a place within the universe, whether you wish it or not.”

She rolled up the sleeve of her left arm and there were what appeared to be five numbers in a row. Somewhat blurred due to her wrinkled skin. Gerda stretched the skin down with her right thumb so that the numbers came clear. Sheila stared at them for a moment and then suddenly looked away, because she now knew what those numbers meant.



“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry Gerda. I didn’t know. I didn’t know.”

Gerda slowly rolled down her sleeve. “You need to know, as all the world needs to know. Yes, our married surname was not Hart. We had it changed from Hartstein, and my maiden name was Finkel. My husband’s first name was shortened from Heinrich to Henry. We were, and will always be, Jewish.”

“Is that why you had a private funeral for him in the city?”

“Yes, at the synagogue. It is a beautiful place in which to rest one’s soul in prayer.”

“My class went on an excursion there last year. It was rather magical, so peaceful. The ceremonies were explained to us. Greta, why don’t you go more often?”

“I can when I can. It is not easy.”

“You met your husband in that concentration camp?”

“Yes, but on the railway journey to the camp, after having been separated for some time. God only knows how we survived that death camp at Auschwitz, but we did. Our parents did not, neither did my elder brother, Jacob, or my sister Goldie. But why Heinrich and I should have survived, is known only to God. Perhaps it was our love for each other. You see, Sheila, we were two teenagers desperately in love with each other. We’d only met a few months before the nazis rounded us up and put us on a train to Auschwitz. There, we were separated male and female. But how could love endure all those years? Oh yes, you could keep love in a death camp — there was much love among the cruelty, the beatings, the pain and the starvation. We re-united again when we were freed, but it had been a terrible long search for each other. We succeeded, and oh, the joy! The love we had kept in our hearts survived more than the hate that surrounded us. We were still in love when Heinrich — I suppose I should really call him Henry again — went to Heaven.”

Sheila was crying, the heavy sobs wracking her body, and Gerda came around the table and held her, stroking her hair and talking softly. “It’s all right, my little one. But it may prompt you to understand and realise what a group tattoo really means, and that sometimes it may be forced upon you by other people’s opinions. So, it is up to you to decide whether it is something you wish to live with for the remainder of your life. In a free world such as we now live in, you are the only one who can make that decision. No others.”

“Your paintings. We saw one in the city with over five hundred dollars price-tag, why is that, Gerda. . . but I think I have already worked it out.”

Gerda nestled her head against Sheila’s, wiping the tears away with a clean handkerchief. “Yes, but you must never tell. It will be a secret between us.”

“I remember our studies at school. There’s an organisation, isn’t there, for survivors of the Holocaust who are poor? And that’s where all your money goes.”

“Shhh! No one outside these walls must know. Promise me?”

Sheila sniffled. “I promise, cross my heart. I’ll keep your secret, forever.”

Later, when Sheila had told Annabelle about it, her mother was at first horrified, then dumbfounded. The family sat around the kitchen table that Sunday evening simply awed by the tale that Sheila had to tell. But Sheila kept back the part concerning the painting in the art shop window.

Percy looked up from his fish and chips and grinned. “Mrs. Hart has a heart! Mrs Hart has a heart!”

“Mrs Hart has more than a heart, she has belief.” said Sheila. “And without belief and love, this world would crumble.”

Annabelle looked at her daughter. “I’m proud of you, my darling, for having had the courage to own up to what was happening at school, both the high and the primary. Very proud of you.” She turned to Damien, who sighed, put his knife and fork down and said: “I’m full.”

Annabelle looked him straight in the face. “Come Monday, we are both going to town to see the primary school principal about Mr. Munroe. I think it’s time.” •



Motoring Memoirs

1935 Lagonda M45R (C1—11)

This car , which arrived in Australia sometime during the 1960s, is capable of achieving 160km/h, and still has the original and very effective rod brakes and adjustable suspension. Due to clever engineering the M45 was the fastest British sports car in its time.

In 1933 the M45 was released with a 4.5 litre Meadows engine, but one of the finest example was this 1935 model. In June of that year, Lagonda put two cars into the Le Mans 24 hour race and drove to victory, but sadly the company was in financial trouble and could not take advantage of the win. A sad ending for a great company that began in 1899. This car features one of the 52 Rapide engines that won in Le Mans. It is owned by Graham Lawrence of New South Wales. •

