

BETSEY BATCHELOR

Wing, 2020
Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SIMON BARKER

Elf King's Daughter

A while after I'd started high school, we visited the Foxes' house. Mr. Fox was an old friend of Dad's from overseas. He and dad had arrived in Australia by the same taxi. That was before my sister and I were born. It was before Dad and Mum got married. Dad was working in London at an aluminium company. Writing that long word *aluminium* every day was wearing him out. He'd sailed to England on a ship after the war. Dad was the sailor who peeled the spuds. He peeled them all the way across the equator from Sydney and grew a goatee. But when he wanted to go home, there were no ships. They were all packed with migrants and it was too expensive to fly. Flying was out of the question. Dad knew some other people so they said, "We'll take a taxi." They bought an old London one and headed off. When they struck India, they became lost or had no map or something. So they loaded the taxi on a boat because there were boats from India and then they drove from Perth. It was in the newspapers.

In the taxi was Mr. Fuchs. He was born in Vienna but he was returning to Australia because he'd fled here before the war. His parents were Jewish and they had to escape the Nazis or they would have put them in an extermination camp. So they switched their name to Fox and became refugees. In Australia they ordered him into a camp anyway. "Because they are drongos," Dad said, "blinded by prejudice."

When the war blew up, those drongos said, "All right. You can go back to England and be in the army." Mr. Fox was old enough by then but he wasn't allowed to shoot because he spoke German. He could still be in the English army even without a gun. After the surrender he wanted to come to Australia again because he liked it here and the lady he'd married in London was German. She wasn't Jewish. She was from Berlin. When the Russians invaded, she hid up a chimney full of soot. She was skinny because food had become short. If she didn't hide, the Russian soldiers would have raped her repeatedly because Stalin had ordered ten days of raping against the Germans as a punishment for being Nazis. Some others squeezed in the taxi from London, about five or six of them, and they were dad's friends too.

Back in Sydney, Mr. Fox was an architect and his hair grew long like Einstein's. He spoke with an accent but he sounded very posh and his wife sounded even posher. She drank cocktails and smoked Benson & Hedges. She

used to dance in a ballet. She wanted to settle in America. But Mr. Fox decided, “No, Australia is best for us. Recall what Sigmund Freud said after visiting America: America is a big mistake.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Fox told him, “that Sigmund was another one of your Viennese.”

The Foxes lived in a modern house in Turramurra. It wasn’t as new as ours. But it was designed in the modern style, Dad said. That was called Bauhaus. Our house wasn’t designed at all. It was just a box of bricks thrown up by the housing commission. The Foxes had a fireplace and over the fireplace hung an oil painting of Mrs. Fox when she was young and lovely. Mum said you could see where Susan had acquired her good looks. Susan was their daughter. Susan had no brothers or sisters and she was about one year older than me. When we were babies we all went on holidays to Newport. In the photo album is a picture of Mum and Dad in their swimmers and Susan’s mum and dad in theirs. Mum is wearing a bikini and a frilly bathing cap. “Look at David!” Mum says when she sees the photograph of Mr. Fox in his continental Vees. Susan and I are in the photo sitting in a basket on the sand squinting in the glare. We look stupid. “That was a nice holiday,” Mum always says.

When we walked up the Foxes’ driveway, Susan was inside waiting. She fussed about us. I hadn’t expected that. Seeing her made me feel a bit strange. I was already forgetting what being with girls was like because there weren’t any girls in my classes anymore and the only ones I saw a lot were my little sister and her friends. But they didn’t count. Susan was blonde and she acted very grown-up. When we used to visit before I went to high school, we’d eat first before the adults and then we’d go and occupy ourselves while they were having their dinner. Susan used to take me into the back shed and we’d play with her white mice. She’d lift them out of the cage by their tails and drop one in my hand and say, “You watch what it can do.” The mouse would creep up my sleeve all the way to my chest and down the other sleeve out into my other hand. “Did you like how that felt?” she used to ask me and then she would let the mouse do it to her and she’d giggle. Once, when our parents were inside eating schnitzel, Susan told my fortune. “This is a German custom,” she said. You tip the melted wax from a beeswax candle into a brass bowl of cold water. When the wax hardens, you can tell from the twisted shapes what your

fortune is. “It’s a crown,” Susan said when I poured the wax. “That means illness.”

This time I asked Susan if she still had her white mice and she said, “No, the mother mouse kept eating her babies and so we had to dispose of them.” Instead we ate dinner with our parents. For starters we had squares of pumpernickel with liverwurst on top. While Mrs. Fox cut the pumpernickel, Susan handed the slices through the little hatchway to the dining room.

“I love that little hatch,” Mum said. “I always wanted one.”

“You have to have a wall to put it in,” Dad said, “not like our poor excuse of a kitchen.”

We had avocado pear with dressing on, like James Bond. When we were all eating, Mum and Mrs. Fox discussed her relatives in America. One of them was having marriage trouble, Mrs. Fox said. Susan said, “Mutti, I bet that Jack will divorce Tanti because she’s quite neurotic.”

“Please don’t say that,” Mrs. Fox said.

“No, you have to face the facts, Mutti. You can’t deny her neurosis.”

“Leave that avocado for the guests,” Mrs. Fox scolded. “Don’t eat it all.”

“But I love it. It’s so delicious,” Susan said.

After dinner, our parents relaxed in the lounge room. As well as their oil painting, the Foxes had African masks on their bare walls. Their lounge suite had been built in Sweden. Mum said it was gorgeous. They owned Persian carpets too and a Persian cat to sit on them and scratch. The cat’s name was Guderian. Mr. Fox explained that was a Prussian tank commander. “It’s supposed to be a joke. Ha, ha,” Susan said.

Mr. Fox played a new record on his stereo. The cover was in German. The song was called “Der Erlkönig.” At the start were a lot of notes from the piano. Dad said, “Listen to that left hand. That could be Jelly Roll.”

“What is Jelly Roll?” Mr. Fox asked.

“Jelly Roll Morton,” Dad said.

They liked “Der Erlkönig” so much they played it over and over. Mr. Fox said, “Isn’t Fischer-Dieskau extraordinary?” And Dad agreed. Mrs. Fox didn’t say anything so Mr. Fox tapped her arm and said, “Don’t you think it’s extraordinary?”

She said, “No. I’m sorry, David. It reminds me only of the Hitler time.”

Mr. Fox objected, “But, Angelein, it’s Shubert.”

“No,” Mrs. Fox said back to him. “It’s Goethe and it reminds me of the Hitler time.”

Susan invited me into her bedroom. My little sister wanted to come too of course. I said, “No, you piss off.” And we locked Susan’s door. But Mum came and knocked and said, “Don’t be so mean. Allow your sister in.” So we had to.

Susan had her own Persian carpet. We sat on it and listened to songs from *Hair*. “Show me your arm,” Susan said. She got a pen from her writing desk and started drawing on my skin. I thought she’d only write her name or something, like we used to do in primary school. But she covered my whole arm with patterns. “Do you like me doing this?” she murmured. I didn’t know but I told her that I did. Susan said to me, “You have very brown skin.”

“It’s probably my Portuguese blood,” I told her.

After she’d finished that, Susan unwrapped some bubble gum and demonstrated how to blow a giant bubble without using her fingers. “Do you want to try?” she asked. I thought she was going to unwrap some more for me. But instead she put out her own bubble gum on her tongue. “Go on. Just take it in your mouth,” she said. I couldn’t tell if she was joking. “Are you afraid of my spit?” she said. So I opened my mouth and let her put the gum inside off her tongue. It felt already warm and wet. “You should see the look on your face,” she said and laughed. I felt embarrassed. “Now you’re blushing,” she said. But I managed to blow a bubble. “Hey, you’re pretty good,” she said.

“I want to try!” my little sister whinged.

“You’re too young,” I told her. But Susan unwrapped another piece. My little sister was really crappy. So Susan cupped the gum over my sister’s mouth and made her blow. She puffed as hard as she could and the bubble grew bigger than her head. When it popped, Susan and I both laughed. But my sister was upset. Susan picked most of the gum off my sister’s face but it was stuck to her hair for good. Susan tried brushing, but that made my sister look like Phyllis Diller.

When it was time to go home, Mum noticed and said, “Goodness, what happened to your hair?”

“Her bubble gum exploded,” Susan said.

“Bubble gum?” Mum asked and stared.

“This is Susan’s latest craze,” Mr. Fox explained. “They pick these crazes up at school.”

“And you had some?” Mum said to my sister.

“Well, he did too,” she said. She meant me. She told Mum I’d chewed Susan’s after she’d had it in her mouth. Mum gave me a cross look for that. Mum disapproved of bubble gum. Bubble gum was vulgar and American.

The Foxes walked down their driveway with us in the dark when we were getting into our old car. Mr. Fox gave Dad “Der Erlkönig” and said, “Since you enjoyed it so much, Will, feel free to keep it as long as you wish.”

“Won’t you want to play it?” Dad said.

“No,” Mr. Fox told him, “it will haunt Angelein’s dreams. She has the sensibility of a ballet dancer. She prefers only the Slavic composers.”

“Danke schön,” Dad said.

In the car on the way home it was quiet for a while and then Mum started complaining. “I can’t get over how Susan’s behaviour has deteriorated,” she said. “I was so shocked by the way she treats Angela. Why do they allow that? I thought she was so disrespectful. And all that slang.”

“Yes,” Dad said.

I wondered what they were talking about. When we’d said goodbye they were smiling and laughing but now they suddenly seemed upset. “It’s because they’ve never said no to her,” Mum told Dad. Dad shook his head.

After a while Dad started singing the song again. “*Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort Erlkönigs Töchter am düstern Ort?*”

“What are you singing?” my sister asked.

“Goethe,” Dad said.

“What’s Goethe?”

“She wants to know what the words mean,” Mum told him.

Dad said, “It means, ‘My father, my father, don’t you see there the daughter of the Elf King in that something place?’” He couldn’t remember one of the German bits so he said “something place.”

“The Elf King?” my sister said.

“Yes. It’s a song about a man who is carrying his sick child home through the dark forest on horseback and the Elf King is chasing.”

“It sounds rude,” my sister said.

“What?”

“That word.”

“Oh, *Vater*. That’s just how the Germans pronounce *father*,” Dad told her. “*Mein Vater*. My father.”

BETSEY BATCHELOR

Roundabout, 2020
Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

“It sounds rude,” my sister said.

Then suddenly a wild animal dashed across the road. By this time we were halfway home and speeding through the bushland. Dad jammed on the brakes and skidded sideways off the bitumen.

“My god!” Mum screamed and grabbed the dashboard. It was a fox. When we peered out the windscreen we saw it bounding into the darkness between the gum trees down toward the creek.

“Look. It’s clutching something in its jaws,” Dad said, “somebody’s god-forsaken chook.” A white feather floated in the headlight beams.

“Well, thank goodness we didn’t crash,” Mum said. “You gave me such a turn I thought we were done for.”

“Not quite,” Dad said, “not this time.”

When he drove off, Mum said to him, “There’s no need to rush.”

“*Er reitet geschwind,*” Dad sang.

“Never mind that. Just be more cautious,” Mum said. “It’s pitch-dark along this road.” So Dad slowed to a crawl.

When he stopped the car in our driveway, he sang the ending. “*Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not; In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.*”

“And what does that mean?” Mum asked him.

He told her it meant “He reached the destination with difficulty and something or other and in his arms the child was dead!”

“How morbid,” Mum said.

“That’s the Germans for you,” Dad said.

“But David isn’t morbid,” Mum said.

“No,” Dad said. “David is Austrian. That’s altogether a different kettle of fish.”

Inside our house Mum said, “Now, miss, I’ll have to scrape that awful gum out of your hair.”

“It feels so sticky,” my sister said.

“What a nightmare. Don’t tell me I’m going to have to shave your head.” My sister started crying. “And how did you get all that biro on your arm?” Mum said to me.

“Susan drew on me,” I told her.

“For god’s sake! And are you still chewing that bubble gum? Go and spit it out. And scrub that biro off your arm in the laundry or it’ll soil the sheets.”

While I was scrubbing, I overheard Mum say, “It’s because they’ve allowed her to do everything she pleases.

They haven’t exercised any discipline at all. I know David’s indulgent but why doesn’t Angela put her foot down? She’ll be the very devil when she’s sixteen.”

I brushed my teeth but didn’t throw the bubble gum away. In my bedroom I popped it back inside my mouth and chewed. I stayed awake thinking about seeing Susan. Outside our street was quiet. But the song kept going through my head.

Days later I woke up in the dark and heard the song again.

Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?

Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön.

The words were very loud. I thought Dad must be up late listening. But he wasn’t. The song was in my head. Over and over it played and I couldn’t seem to stop it. I felt hot and sweaty too. I kicked my covers off. My pyjamas were soaked. I was aching all over. I tried to lie still and put up with it, but I couldn’t. So I walked into my parents’ bedroom without turning on the light and said to Mum that I felt sick. I could hardly talk. My throat was burning. When Mum touched my forehead, she said, “You’re on fire.” That’s when I started shivering and shaking. My teeth were chattering.

Then Mum decided to fly into a panic. She poked Dad until he woke up. He had to pull his dirty clothes back on and drive me to the hospital. The streets were deserted on the way and I had the shudders. Only a man with a bandaged head was in the waiting room. He shouted a lot until the police took him. But I paid no attention because I felt delirious and even the loudest noises sounded far, far away. When I looked across the room I felt like I was floating and high up in the air. I felt like I was flying up to the sky. I felt like an insect stuck to the ceiling peering down. And all the time I was still hearing the song in my head.

Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn

Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein.

Simon Barker lives in Australia, and his stories have been published in the UK, North America, Turkey, Indonesia, Australia, and the Indian subcontinent.