

MURRAY BAIL

'Murray Bail is the warmest and most quick-witted of storytellers'

Michael Ondaatje

Camouflage



and

Other Stories

v

About the Author

Murray Bail was born in Adelaide in 1941. He is the author of three novels and one previous collection of short stories. His novel *Eucalyptus* was awarded the 1999 Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

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CAMOUFLAGE AND OTHER STORIES

Murray Bail


V I N T A G E

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Suppose a mouse were to run across a stone. Just count each step it takes. Only forget the 'each'; only forget the word 'step'. Then each step will seem a new movement . . . A flickering will begin. The mouse will start to flicker. Look about you: the world is flickering (like the mouse).

—notebooks of A. I. Vvedensky (1904-41)

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The Seduction of My Sister

My sister and I were often left alone together. She was younger than me, about eighteen months. I hardly had time to know her, although we were alone together for days on end, weekends included.

Our father worked odd hours at an Anglo-American tobacco company. And our mother, she had a job at Myer's. Ladies' shoes, manchester, toys and whitegoods were some of her departments. She worked Saturday mornings, and there was the stocktaking. She put in a lot of overtime, working herself to the bone. Some nights our mother arrived home after dark, more like a widow in black than a mother, and passed around meat pies from a paper bag, one for each of us, including our father. Otherwise we were 'left to our devices', our mother's term; I heard her explain to a neighbour over the fence.

For a long time I took little notice of her, my sister, always at my elbow, in the corner of my eye. Whatever I was doing she would be there. More than once I actually tripped over my sister. She seemed to have nothing better to do than get in the way. She said very little, hardly a word. She and I had different interests, we were interested in totally different things, yet if I was asked today what her interests were I couldn't say. Tripping over her once too often or else wanting nothing more than to be left alone I would turn and shout at her to go, get lost, even giving her a shove; anything to get rid of her. Half an hour later she would be back, all smiles or at least smiling slightly as if nothing had happened.

My sister was skinny, not much to look at. She had short hair in a fringe, and a gap between her teeth. If anybody asked what colour eyes I could not answer, not exactly. There was a mole above her lip, to the left, almost touching her lip.

Taking an interest in something or standing near a group she had a way of holding her mouth slightly open. I can't remember a single thing she said.

The mole could have by now transformed into a beauty spot, I've seen them on other women. Brothers though are supposed to be blind to the attractions of their sisters.

Our father had a small face, and although he didn't himself smoke the odour of fresh tobacco followed him like a cloud, filling the passages of the house. I don't know about him and our mother. About their happiness or contentment even it was difficult to say. When our father spoke it was to himself or to his shoes; he hardly looked at our mother. In reply she would say nothing at all. Sometimes she would make a strange humming sound or turn to us and say something unrelated. Arriving home after standing behind a counter all day our mother looked forward to putting her feet up. After the table had been cleared our mother and father often went over the various budgets, income and outgoings, gaining some sort of pleasure or satisfaction from the double-checking. If he saw us watching our father would give a wink and make a great show of scratching his head and licking the pencil.

It was a short street, the houses dark-brick from the thirties. Each house had a gravel drive and a garage, although hardly anyone had a car, and a front hedge, every house had its box hedge, except directly opposite us, which was an empty block, the only one left in the street. It was surprising how long it remained empty, swaying with grasses, lantana in the left-hand corner. Who in their right mind would want

to live all day looking across at us? Our father winked at us, our mother taking a breath, not saying a word.

It remained then, a hole in the street, a break in the hedges, in the general tidiness, an eyesore to more than one.

Nothing lasts, that is true; it goes without saying. Nevertheless, the morning we woke up and saw pyramids of sand and a cement-mixer on the block it was a shock to the system, the builders more like intruders than new neighbours, trampling over habits and feelings.

Slowly, then rapidly accelerating, a house took shape out of the disorder and commotion; I would have preferred it to last forever, so much there to follow, to take in and assemble in my mind. I can't speak for my sister.

Instead of retreating at right angles to the street like any other house, including ours, it was positioned longways, parallel to the street. It caused our father to give a brief laugh of misunderstanding. He called it 'The Barn'. Instead of bricks the colour of lamb chops which slowly turn brown, ours, it had cream bricks of a speckled kind, and grey tiles on the roof instead of the painted corrugated iron of ours.

I came home one afternoon late to see my sister standing at our front gate as always, waiting for me; only, I could tell by the way she was twisting one leg around the other she was talking to someone.

The Gills had moved in, their doors and windows wide open. Gordon withdrew a hand and introduced himself. He was their only son; about my age.

The house inside was still smelling of paint. In his bedroom he had a stamp album and cigarette cards scattered on his desk, and merely shrugged at the model aeroplanes suspended from the ceiling, as if he had lost interest in them. We went from room to room, my sister and I. In the lounge Gordon demonstrated the record-player which opened on silver elbows into a cocktail cabinet. Shelves and glass cabinets displayed plates and bowls and

porcelain figures. From another room a clock chimed. Now and then Gordon stepped forward to explain something or take it from our hands, then returned to the window, answering a question or my sister's exclamations. Across the street directly opposite stood our house, stubborn, cramped-looking. It was all there to see.

Mr Gill put down a lawn, bordered by roses, not ordinary roses, but dark roses, and stepping stones of slate to the front door. Mr Gill had a moustache, the only one in the street, and a strong set of teeth. From the moment they met he called my father 'Reg', and made a habit of dropping it with informal gravity into every other sentence, sometimes flashing a smile, which pleased my father no end. 'Do you think, Reg, this weather's going to hold?' And, if he was in the middle of something, pruning or striding around to open the car door for Mrs Gill, who remained seated looking straight ahead, he'd glance up and with a single nod say 'Reg', and return to what he was doing. Even this pleased my father.

It was our mother who suggested doubts. 'No one,' she was scraping the plates, 'is like them, not in this street. They might as well be from another planet.'

With his wide shirt open at the neck our father put his finger on it. 'They're all right,' he smiled, 'they're extroverts.'

Our mother always looked tired. I wondered why she kept on working, what on earth for, but she went on almost every day of her life, Saturdays included, at Myer's. Through the store she bought a washing machine and a Hoover, demonstration models, otherwise brand new. In turn the store made a new fridge possible, the varnished icebox ending up in the garage, along with our father's hat-stand, tennis racquet in its press, and a God-forsaken electric toaster. Chimes were added to the front door, a new letterbox smartened up the front, father's idea, displaying

our number in wrought iron beneath the silhouette of a Mexican asleep under his hat.

Taking a tour of our house one afternoon Gordon barely said a word. A floorboard kept creaking; I noticed the light was yellowish and the walls, carpets and chairs had a scruffy plainness.

In no time we were outside by the fig tree where I searched around to retrieve something. 'That'd be a hundred years old,' I pointed with my chin.

To demonstrate, my sister in her cotton dress shinned up into the first fork. Grinning, she looked like a monkey, I could have clocked her one. I glared and hissed at her, but she took no notice, which only gave the impression she was used to such cruel treatment.

I steered Gordon into the garage, my sister scrambling down from the tree, not wanting to be left out. Our mother and father never threw anything away. Poking around I held up things I thought might be of interest, waiting for his reaction. And Gordon too began examining things, the old tools, tin boxes, our mother's dressmaker's dummy from before she was married. He squatted down, my sister alongside. It was Gordon who came across the gramophone records still in their brown-paper sleeves. Reading the labels one by one he carefully put them back.

I thought he was being polite.

'Tell you what.' I had an idea. 'You go and stand on your front lawn,' I glanced up at the sky, 'and I'll send a few of these over the roof at you.'

'What for?' He remained squatting.

It took a while for the penny to drop.

'See if you can catch them or something, I don't know.' I had to push him. 'You stay here,' I told my sister.

Before Gordon could change his mind I yelled out from the back of our house, 'Coming now!' And in a simple quoit-throwing motion sent up in the half-light the great Caruso singing something mournful in Italian. It soared above our

iron roof, the disc, and in a moment of dark beauty tilted, almost invisibly, and hovered like the tenor holding a high note, before returning to earth. My sister and I both had our mouths open. I reached our gate, sister alongside, to see Gordon waiting on their patch of lawn, hands in pockets, suddenly give a hoarse cry as the black 78 brushed his shoulder and thudded into the lawn beside him.

Hardly able to run, laughing too much, I crossed the street. 'What d'you reckon?' I gave him a shove. 'It almost took your head off.'

Picking up the record Gordon wiped it with his sleeve.

Nobody spoke. He could have gone one way or the other, I could see. I took another look at him, my sister gaping at one of us, then the other. I ran back to my position, not saying anything.

I sent over *Land of Hope and Glory* and, before he could recover, *The Barber of Seville*, followed by the *Nutcracker Suite*. I had others in a stack at my feet when the street lights came on, and Mrs Gill began calling in her musical voice, 'Gordon.'

Anyone could see he was not suited for sporting activities. The sloping shoulders, the paleness, even the hang of his arms—unco-ordinated. Yet the following night Gordon was in position early, pacing up and down, looking over to our side.

I waited for it to be almost dark. To my sister I called out, 'Look at me. See how I do it. If you like, you can have a go later.'

I began throwing and threw, in quick succession, one musical disc after the other. They were hard to spot in the night sky, that of course being the idea, their closeness suddenly revealed by a faint hissing near the face or the back of the head. They were lethal. Quick reflexes were necessary. And concentrating hard and working on his technique Gordon took everything I sent at him. He used his

feet, swaying from the hips. With each throw of mine the better he became; and so his confidence grew. It wasn't long before he began in a lackadaisical manner grabbing at the black shapes as they came down at him or past him, managing to pull down in mid-air one in three or four, without saying a word, even after leaping with an arm outstretched, thereby putting pressure right back on me on the other side, sister looking on. Some I tried sending in low or at unexpected angles, anything to catch him off balance.

My sister had moved to the front gate where my throwing efforts could not be seen, where instead she could observe Gordon facing up to the onrushing discs. For a while the pressure began to get to me; I had to talk to myself. The heads of Mr Gill's prize-winning roses were severed; another night, a disc I gave too much wrist kept on going above Gordon's shout and outstretched arm and smashed against the mock louvered shutters Mr Gill had bolted to the wall, showering Gordon with fine-grooved shards. Almost before he could recover I sent a recital of a legendary pianist, forget his name, Jewish, who died just the other day: wide of the mark, wrong grip, it sailed through the open window of the Gills' lounge room, my sister and I waiting for the crash of all that bone-china which never came. There were moments of ordinariness, moments of poetry. Simplicity, I realised, produced elegance, not only in the throw, in Gordon's response as well. One night, Melba, collector's item I'm told, sliced through Mr Limb's new telephone wires next door which fell over Gordon's face and shoulders like string. Gordon froze, my sister too; hand went to her mouth. They didn't have a clue about electricity, Gordon and my sister were not mechanically minded. Realising he was not about to be electrocuted Gordon kicked the wires and some of his embarrassment aside and went back to his crouch.

Engrossed in our separate tasks we hardly spoke, every throw presenting a different set of problems. It changed Gordon, it opened him up. He'd come around to my side

early, rubbing his hands as if it was freezing, my sister looking on.

'One of those records the other night,' he followed me into the garage, 'boy, was it funny.'

I was sorting through the few that were left.

'You ought to hear *Laughing Gas* one day. It had the old man rolling on the floor.'

Along with *Little Brown Jug*, the Satchmo selections and *Sing, Sing, Sing* it would have been our father's. Our mother, I was told, had a singing voice. Always with a grin hovering at the ready our father had a taste for imaginary honky-tonk playing; he made the cutlery jump on the table, sister and I watching. I began putting the remaining 78s back in the trunk.

'What are you doing?' Gordon grabbed my shoulder. He began reading the labels. 'What about these?'

At that moment I wanted to pause; something felt out of place. Twice he whistled he was ready. I stared at my fingernails, waiting to think clearly. A few houses away a dog barked, and someone was trying to start a motorbike.

It took less than a week, if that, to go through the remaining 78s, and when they were gone we tried chipped or broken discs, until it was too difficult to throw or nothing was left of them. Even so, when I realised the entire collection had gone, a feeling spread in my stomach of corresponding emptiness.

I dismissed Gordon's suggestion we continue, using saucers, his idea of a joke: saw him nudge-nudging my sister. She was hanging around us, always there. A glance at her scrawniness could trigger irritation in me, I don't know why. Anything he said she'd listen, mouth open in that way. I would have said, look, scram, buzz off; words to that effect. I was about to, when Gordon reached for something wrapped