VINTAGE

Change of Heart

Barbara Anderson

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About the Author

Barbara Anderson is the author of seven novels – *Girls High*, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* (winner of the 1992 Wattie Award), *All the Nice Girls*, *The House Guest, Proud Garments*, *Long Hot Summer* and *The Swing Around* – and two collections of short stories. She lives in New Zealand.

Also by Barbara Anderson

I Think We Should Go Into the Jungle
Girls High
Portrait of the Artist's Wife
All the Nice Girls
The House Guest
Proud Garments
Glorious Things and Other Stories
Long Hot Summer
The Swing Around

IN MEMORY

J.A.W. – C.G.R.W

CHANGE OF HEART

BARBARA ANDERSON

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

Our planet
is poorly equipped
for delight.
One must
snatch
gladness
from the days that are.
In this life
it’s not difficult to die.
To make life
is more difficult by far.

Vladimir Mayakovsky,
‘To Sergei Yessenin’ 1928

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Heaven knows how it will end, but I will start with the house where I was born and the little window where the sun came peeping in at morn, which is a steal from a second-rate poem. I know it is second rate because my father, who was well educated, told me so. He compared it with another poem which begins *Oft in the stilly night ere slumber's chain hath bound me* which is first rate. Something to do with sentiment rather than sentimentality perhaps, but I liked the idea of the sun peeping in the low windows of Cornwallis. Hardly have to get up – the sun, I mean.

My father described the small country town as 'unique', which is Latin for one horse. Nevertheless it possessed a slow charm, the place where I was born; old trees, endless cows, a good view of the mountain when visible, and a band rotunda. Always a good sign, a band rotunda, redolent of community spirit and oompah and children tumbling about on good green grass.

I was born at home and, according to hearsay, arrived with a hiss and roar. 'Only ten minutes old that noise, Mr Perkins,' said the midwife to my father when he was allowed in to inspect. 'Hard to believe, isn't it?' She also said that I had no neck, head straight on my shoulders just like my mother. This was a joke, I learned later. There was nothing unusual about my mother's neck. I do remember, however, that she couldn't wear yellow.

There is something faintly unreliable about the word hearsay. A sense of information heard on the wing, rather

than delivered face to face, sneezer to breather and eye to eye.

When my mother had recovered from my arrival she took me for short walks around the little town. One day the pram and I came to grief on some steps, an accident my father described as a triumph of enterprise over environment, there being few steps in flat Cornwallis. He added that he would have thought the town must be one of the safest places in the world for a little light carriage exercise but that a determined woman could achieve anything.

I bear the scar to this day, though you would have to look for it, as it is obscured by my moustache which I have worn for as long as it has been available. I have always been partial to moustaches. Mine is adequate but not grotesque, certainly not toothbrush. The French have a saying, *A kiss without a moustache is like an egg without salt.* A nice analogy, though one at which my wife Hester has ceased to smile.

My earliest true memory is my reaction to the sight of my first corpse when our neighbour, Miss Stratton, took me next door to see Mother before they took her away, because she looked so beautiful. I knew instantly that, beautiful or not, all was not well with the still figure on the bed, and ran home howling, to be met by my mother and Mr Garland, a local gardener who sometimes gave her a hand with the heavy stuff. They were discussing the fate of a flowering currant, I remember. Mr Garland wouldn't give it house room: once they're a goner, they're a goner. My mother tucked me under one arm and said she would like to give it one more chance, and what on earth was the matter now with the Laird of Cockpen?

'She's dead, dead, dead like the squashed cat,' I bawled.

'There, there,' she said, patting vaguely. 'Don't worry, Oliver, Mrs Stratton has gone to heaven. Nevertheless I'll

speak to Miss Stratton, though perhaps not immediately. As I said Mr Garland, one more chance, please.'

Despite the glimpse of mortality to which Miss Stratton had exposed me, she and I became allies. It was she who introduced me to the wonders of America and its language. She took me to the flicks. Unfortunately she insisted on holding my hand en route because of the responsibility, but it was worth it. Every Saturday morning we set off for what I learned to call the flea pit and she knew as the cinema. I don't remember my parents ever going to a film. If so, they never took me. It is thanks to Miss Stratton that I learned the joys of 'Stick 'em up' and 'Reach for the sky', of a land where gangsters said 'Dees', 'dem' and 'dose guys' and swaggers were called bums, where anything could happen and often did, where words jumped with energy: a welcome change from Father's measured cadences.

My father, Charles Octavius Perkins, stood about my childhood like a large and distant tree. I see my mother, Amelia, more as a distracted-looking shrub. A white may perhaps – she certainly had the same peppery smell – but the connection may be subconscious. Her second name was May, but she preferred to be known as Amelia as who would not.

My mother described herself as romantic. She drifted, she dreamed, she disliked household tasks and took little naps. She also disliked a habit to which I was prone as a child. I made things up. Mr Sergeant the butcher's wooden leg was called Tiger because a tiger had bitten it off in Mandalay where the flying fishes play. Our teacher Miss Presley had a mad sister whom she locked in the garden shed each morning before she came to school. I had seen this alarming sight, I said, and described it in detail – the curled uncut fingernails, the hair, the wide wild eyes. Standard Four responded like eighteenth-century Bedlam viewers. The phantom Miss Presley and the leg called Tiger

gave me a drawcard. Lonely children must find them where they can.

Frankie Boyd, the part-time assistant at the public baths, an amiable youth with pimples and enormous feet, was another victim. I told the class that Frankie peed in the baths. Owing to various lapses in the past they were less surprised than they might have been. ‘Pisser,’ we muttered as we handed over our sixpences. Eventually he leaned across the counter, grabbed my collar in one hand and Billy Bowland’s in the other, and hissed, ‘Whad’y’a saying, y’dorks.’

‘Kisser!’ I yelped.

‘Yeah,’ gasped Billy, ‘Kisser Boyd – that’s what the tarts call you.’

Pisser, engulfed by a raspberry red tide of embarrassment and pleasure, dropped us. ‘Who? Which one?’

‘All of them,’ we said.

‘OK, get away in, y’toe rags.’

It couldn’t last, this power, this audience. The word was out; there were murmurs beneath the banner of the Mothers’ Union. Sons were asked by mothers, had Mr Sergeant’s leg been eaten by a tiger? No. Did Miss Presley have a potty sister in the back shed? No. So then, Olly Perkins told whoppers. Pisser was not mentioned. Pissing was rude, and boys learn early that the joys of rudery are lost on mothers.

I was surprised by my mother’s concern. I was proud of my stories and had never thought of them as whoppers, let alone that they might be harmful. My mother never alluded to my inspired make-ups as such. She came out of her reverie (one of her favourite words) long enough to say I had been Romancing and must be careful, though she never said why. I gathered that she used the word to

indicate exaggeration, picturesque visions of imagination, distorted memories. Whoppers in fact, in all but name.

Romance, memory, hearsay and whoppers. What more could a man need.

My only other drawcard with my contemporaries was my friendship with Barney Scott, the bike man. I was the first boy allowed to hang around, to mess about with bikes and Barney. Others followed. We cut patches. We disembowelled inner tubes from punctured tyres, soaked the collapsed grey guts in water to find the leak, then marked the spot with an indelible purple X before handing them over to Barney to glue the patch. Sometimes we sprinkled on the chalk to complete the job, but not often. Barney was a man's man; he made us welcome, never gave unnecessary advice and he explained the wonder of Sturmey-Archer gears. He showed us how to do each job and left us to it.

I wonder what happened to him. Death presumably. Must have by now.

Charles Octavius, as I said, was a man of presence, but lacking in what might be called clout. Clout would have been abhorrent to him. Money also was suspect and not to be mentioned on any account. My mother told me that Father was like the King of England; he did not carry money, had never been inside a butcher's shop, boiled an egg or changed a tyre.

He was born in a small village in Essex in 1876, the eighth of ten children born to the Reverend Henry Horatio Perkins and his wife, Blanche.

Like his father and his older brothers, Charles was destined to take Holy Orders and become a minister in the Anglican Church. The career choices for impecunious sons of clergymen were slim in late-Victorian times. The Church was one salvation for younger sons, commissions in the Army or Navy another; failing that, there were the colonies.

What else could they do, where could they go, those well-educated young men with pale hands and beautiful hair and little money.

Charles entered his university college in the nineties, taking with him the same pewter beer mug over which his elder brothers, Gurth, Egbert and Lionel, had held tenure during their time there. It is mine now, the mug, rather battered but with a nice patina.

As well as the beer mug my father and his brothers took with them something of far more value: their sure and certain belief in Almighty God. It lay within them, this truth; unseen, unmentioned, but there, glowing like a warm ember of comfort in times of melancholy or malaise or indeed joy. Father told me that when confronted by representations of the Sacred Heart in the establishments of his more Popish brethren he was filled with a sense of – how shall I put it? – empathy perhaps, for want of a better word. Not in a religious sense, God forbid, more in the positioning of this inner source of strength.

A classical scholar like his brothers, Charles had Latin and Greek and a fervent love and admiration of things Greek and Roman. As a youth he had seen the stadium at Delphi and the indentations in the stone where five thousand years before the birth of Christ Greek athletes had placed a foot for speedy take-off. These worn dips, he told me, his eyes damp with emotion, were the forerunners of modern starting blocks.

His special interest in Roman art was those astonishing painted burial masks from the second century AD. The only time I have seen an original was in New York. It was that of a middle-aged Egyptian woman with short greying hair and an impelling gaze from eyes heavily blackened with kohl. I found it both chilling and inspiring *because* it was so lively, so obviously a portrait of a real person. Father told me that originally, before the archaeologists and/or grave robbers removed the masks, these glowing portraits topped the

mummified bodies of the deceased. Some of them, apparently, had been regarded as part of the family. Stood around the dining room, that sort of thing. *Memento mori* can be overdone, in my opinion, though of course we all have our preferences.

What a wonderful place New York is. I recommend New York most highly to anyone. It is the only place I have been to Abroad and the only one I should like to revisit. The place was booming, the people seemed to have mastered the art of being both busy and cheerful, and the unexpected happened anywhere, like the day we saw a black man walking along Broadway with a large snake coiling and recoiling about his shoulders. Hester asked him what species of snake it was, the man replied it was a *py*thon and went calmly on his way.

I was attending an international dental conference at the time. I had registered as soon as I saw it was to take place in New York, and Hester was in entire agreement. I remember little of the conference, possibly because I did not attend many sessions, but I do remember that the *py*thon's name was Jacko.

But I digress. Charles also had a small collection of reproduction Greek vases depicting, I discovered when I was high enough to reach for them, scenes reflecting not only the moods and attitudes of their day but also mythical scenes. One or two of these showed excited-looking satyrs chasing fleet-footed but seemingly untroubled maidens endlessly round terracotta curves.

What did I think of them? Not much at the time, but I should like to see them now. Such things give comfort to an older man, a sense of, shall we say, continuity. We can be tempted by the thought that there is not much point in the world continuing to roll once we have, as it were, shoved off, but this is a solipsistic thought and should not be mentioned except when we sit with friends in what my father used to call unbuttoned ease. When we talk the sun

down, thrash out the things that matter, the eternal verities of life and death and how to cope with both or either. I have had two friends in my time. A few more would have been welcome but one must be thankful for what one gets in the way of friends, or wives. Or children.

I first became aware of the rest of the world's probable lack of interest in my future demise not from Mrs Stratton's death, nor indeed from that of the cat, but many years later when I returned to collect my mail from one of the hospitals in which I had almost died. The administration had been slow in forwarding it, and mail is important to a man of intellectual curiosity. After all something agreeable might glint from the tailings of bills, brochures and requests for charity (*Your stamp is an extra gift*), even if it is only a Special on precooked sausages.

Be that as it may, the mail handed over the desk to me that day was disappointing: a Get Well card from Miss de Lillo, my surgery nurse, depicting a white-coated Rabbit House Surgeon with a stethoscope around his neck examining a large anonymous stomach and saying cheerfully to the attendant Rabbit Nurse, 'We've got a biggie here, Trixie.' Plus a power bill.

My point, however, is not the quality of my mail, but my sharp feeling of surprise. I had left the ward, or rather been pushed out of it, more dead than alive, certainly, but definitely out, and yet nothing had changed. The overcrowded ward, the clanging food trolleys, the busy corridors, all were exactly the same. The inhabitants, professional, prone, wheelchaired or ambulatory, continued about their respective businesses without a glance. I didn't expect them to care, of course, but I hadn't, for some reason, expected total invisibility. White-out.

Death is inevitable, of course, and not to be sneezed at if the moment is right. I was not dead obviously. I was standing at the desk clutching my Get Well rabbits and the

power bill but I realised, and this is the important point, *I might just as well have been.*

I was tempted to make a small gesture, some light-hearted reference to the fact that they could all go home now that I was no longer in need of their services (or not so much), but I refrained due to wisdom culled many years ago when I undertook physiotherapy. I lay prone on the treatment slab as the operator, I can call him nothing else, began pummelling my back with such force that I had to remind him this was not some hack beneath his hands but me, and would he please take care. I mentioned this politely with a slight whimsical smile. The young man said nothing, but both his breathing and his thumping hands became heavier. I learned a lesson. When you are in someone else's hands it is best to lie low and avoid comment, especially when the hands are those of the medical fraternity and their ancillaries. These are busy people, these healers and choppers, and not given to quips – except for that smirk of self-satisfaction when their initial diagnosis of one's lumps and bumps has been confirmed by further investigation (see Rabbit with stethoscope).

But at least we can remain interested. Why should we not be interested in our own demise. Apart from the fact that we have no way of knowing after the event, why should we not be surprised that planets continue to spin, trolleys to clang and dogs to bark when one has ceased to be? My son Copland says, quite often, 'Whose life is it anyway?' Surely death is of equal interest from, shall we say, a personal point of view.

But back to Charles Octavius. Have I mentioned that his career was varied, surprisingly so considering that, like his brothers Gurth, Egbert and Lionel, he had always been a conscientious and devout student of theology.

He told me in later life of an experience he had had at a religious retreat. He had missed a train connection and

arrived late. As he walked up the long drive towards the chapel, the still silence of the morning was broken by strong male voices lifted in praise.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes …
Oh Lord we would render
Oh help us to see
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

'I was stunned by the glory and the truth and the wonder,' he said. 'I fell on my benders on the damp grass and gave thanks.'

Until, that is, he tangled with the Thirty Nine Articles. They are not a statement of Christian doctrine, these Articles, more short summaries which seek to define the Anglican position vis-à-vis medieval doctrinal corruptions among Roman Catholics or Calvinists. Article 28, for example, is concerned with that old stumbling block, transubstantiation. Article 6 states that holy scripture contains all that is necessary for salvation. Article 21 that General Councils are not of themselves infallible. Whereas Article 17 contains masterly ambiguity about the difficult topic of predestination.

Before 1865, aspiring postulates to the Anglican clergy had to swear their allegiance to each one of the Thirty Nine Articles. By the time of Father's ordination, however, he would have been required only to affirm that the Articles were 'agreeable to the Word of God' and undertake not to teach in contradiction of them.

So why could this pious young man stumble over something as toothless as the veracity of the Thirty Nine Articles? He told me himself that he had never been one of those haunted young Victorian men who felt their immortal souls to be at risk if they wrestled with the conundrums raised by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* and, even more alarming, *The Descent of Man.*

Like St Augustine of Hippo, my father believed in the essential goodness of all creation. Or had done so, until this belief was shaken when he spent his holidays assisting an exhausted old priest working among the wretchedly poor in the East End of London. This experience, said Charles, seared him for life. Evil, for both St Augustine and Father, was the privation of some good which ought to be had. This privation for those half-starving in the slums was patently obvious; what's more, evil on such a vast scale existed within less than a hundred miles of the Essex village where Henry preached his sermons in the Saxon church with the remains of a Dane's skin pinned above the door, and where his mother Blanche and unmarried sister Decima visited the rural sick.

His experience of life in the slums damaged Charles, not because of the nature of the work but the endless frustrations involved when he realised he could do so little.

'That and the particular Thirty Ninth Article,' he said. 'I realised I must give up my vocation as an ordained priest.'

I am surprised, with hindsight, that I never asked with which one of the Articles he could not be doing. I have a nodding acquaintance with a few of them but I have never checked, nor in fact made a wobbly guess as to which one he might have been alluding. Odd really.

Henry accepted with sorrow his son's decision not to be ordained, as did Gurth and Egbert, but Lionel was a horse of a different temper. Obviously, he said, Charles had been put off by the thought that he might end up being a perpetual curate in an East End parish. 'I shouldn't worry, Chas,' he said, 'I'm sure the Almighty would not be so unkind.'

Not unnaturally my father took offence at this slander and the rift continued. Charles never mentioned his brother Lionel. If I asked after him he would say only that Lionel had not fulfilled his father's expectations. He had left the Church soon after Father, and died of disappointment in the

West Indies. My mother said no one can die of disappointment. Disappointment is a condition not a disease. Men might die disappointed, certainly, as many of us probably will, but not from disappointment, in the West Indies or anywhere else. And had anyone seen her reading glasses – ah, there they were.

After his decision Charles changed his college and began reading Law. Fortunately he was able to obtain what my son Copland calls ‘cross credits’ for some of his theological studies, as a result of which he did not have to begin reading Law from scratch. The worst, he said, undeniably the most sullen and numbing subject of all, was Torts. ‘Never, dear boy, read Torts.’

He found the subject of Law boring after the intellectual cut and thrust of Theology, especially as the nineties had been a particularly interesting time in the annals of the Anglican Church. All, all were there, he said. Doubt, schism, fervour, the glorious and the banal. I suggested that perhaps the mixture had always been similar, not only for the Anglican Church but for all living faiths, but Charles denied this vehemently.

He came down from Oxford with a good Second and the realisation that he would not only have to practise law but, furthermore, he would have to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. There would be no friendly word, much less preferment from relations or friends of his father, all of whom were clerical to the core.

About this time he married my mother, Amelia May Trancer, the daughter of a colleague of his father’s whose vicarage lay within walking distance. My mother, despite, or perhaps because she considered herself a romantic, had good sense and a will of iron.

‘If you hate law, Chas,’ she said, ‘why do it? Why don’t we go to Queensland and grow pineapples with Bobby.’