GEORGE

Also by Frieda Hughes

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GEORGE

A Magpie Memoir

Frieda Hughes

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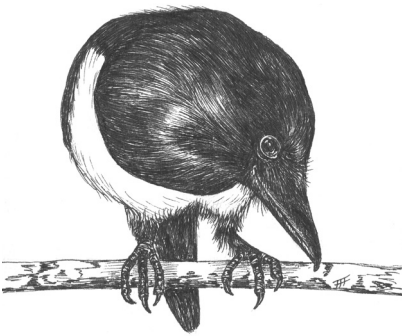
To George and his children



A Note on the Text

This book is based on diary entries made between May 2007 and January 2009, which I returned to when I decided I wanted to write about my life with George. It seemed to me that the diary entries best captured the speed and manner of George's sometimes dramatic daily development – and so I have kept them in place, but have added useful information that I only came across later on, where it felt appropriate.


George.
31/8/19

Prologue

Imagine wanting something since you were old enough to be conscious of wanting it. Imagine a longing for something; a place, a state of being, or a situation, that worked away inside your head all those early years, directing you consciously or unconsciously towards achieving that place, or way of being, or situation that you longed for, because, as my late father always said, if you truly want something you should visualise it and make a space for it in your life.

He also added that we should be very careful what we wish for, because sometimes when we get it, it's not quite what we imagined. If, for instance, you wished for a cash injection of a substantial amount, and you wished with all your heart for this lucky windfall, and then someone you loved dearly died and you inherited a sizeable amount of money in their will, that would be a tragic way to achieve the realisation of your longing. Or if you wished for some time off work and then found yourself afflicted with Covid or a broken leg, that would be counterproductive, as you would be too ill to enjoy your time off. Even as a child, these thoughts occurred to me; I'd read too many myths and fairy stories not to have absorbed the life lessons around which they were based.

No, the things I wanted had to be achieved without causing pain to others, or to myself – except, perhaps, from exhaustion: my own happy exhaustion as a result of my sincere mental and physical efforts.

The things I longed for, other than health, happiness and wealth, probably in that order, were plants, pets, and a home of my own that I would never have to move from. The plants and pets were the embellishment and confirmation of the permanent home and, therefore, the sense of stability and belonging that I craved.

Plants were a direct connection to nature; oh, to have somewhere to grow and propagate them, to smell their earthy roots as I repotted them or planted them out, to possess flowerbeds and herbaceous borders where I could arrange them by colour and leaf-shape, interspersing perennials with evergreens and so never having nothing in the soil when winter came. I didn't understand how anyone could live with bare flowerbeds through the seasons of rain and snow.

I can still remember how exciting I found the smell of lily corms in my late teens and early twenties, fecund and engaging in their sawdust when they came out of their plastic bags from beneath the big, brightly coloured lightweight cardboard squares of label, photograph and description. The anticipation of their future growth and flowering would dig into my chest like a happy mole. Succulents too, with their fluid-filling and prehistoric appearances . . . and delphiniums and foxgloves, pieris and mahonia, campanulas looking as if they were leaking on to the ground like purple-blue milk as their blooms spread, and nasturtiums in orange, pouring over walls and the edges of windowsills. Cherry blossom, lilac and magnolia . . .

In my mind I had images of flowerbeds and combinations of blooms, and I wanted to sculpt gardens out of plants and grow trees tall, so I could clear-stem them to support blowsy crimson or purple clematis. I longed to arch leylandii into interesting shapes and prune everything, that could be so pruned, into a sphere; I had a strange affinity to spheres.

Looking back at the small child I was at the age of, I think, six, I see an impish little girl with hair like a scarecrow; I always brushed

just the top of my fine, scraggy hair, as the knots underneath made it impossible for the useless cushioned brush with short bristles. I tended the French marigolds that my father's older sister, my Aunt Olwyn, once planted during one of her extended stays, in a little round flowerbed cut out of the patch of weedy grass and clover that my father optimistically called 'the lawn'. The 'lawn' constantly encroached over the cut-earth edges, instilling in me a lifelong dislike of any flowerbed–lawn border that doesn't have a defined edge such as pavers, or raised stones, or some means by which to keep them entirely, easily separate.

What astonishes me now was my childish lack of self-consciousness when I picked the marigolds and took them to the town hall to enter them in the flower competition there one year, among all the adults with their prized and fertilised marigold blooms, their specially bred combination marigolds, their nurtured, competition-ready, sodding great golden and crimson flowerheads. What sheer brashness! What delightfully deluded optimism I possessed, to think that I was in with anything so much as half a chance. I was so sure that my little marigolds were the best, because in my eyes they were so incredibly beautiful, so unbelievably perfect – made up, as they were, of the crimson and orange halo of the tightly packed petals that framed their cushiony heads, which were themselves made up of many more tightly packed and crimped smaller petals.

Of course, my connection to plants and my desire to grow them was not just born of my wonderment that nature could sprout so many breathtaking creations; it was also an expression of my desperate longing to put down roots.

I felt as if the ground on which I stood was constantly changing and shifting, and that if I looked away for just a minute, then looked back, the landscape would have altered, and I'd have a whole other universe to acclimatise to because, following the suicide of my

mother, Sylvia Plath, on 11 February 1963, my father, Ted Hughes, found it difficult to settle. His peripatetic lifestyle meant that I never had my few clothes all in one place, or my books (I did not have toys), or make friends (I did not have any real friends). Wherever he went my younger brother, Nick, and I followed, like two trailing limbs. Possessions would have been an encumbrance, but that was OK because as very young children we didn't have any, and that was something else: I longed for possessions.

It wasn't that I wanted to *have* things simply for the sake of it, but I longed to use the responsibility for them, and the size and number of them, as weights with which to anchor myself, so that my father's unpredictable urge to continually uproot us could not shift me from my chosen seabed.

By the time I went to my last school, a boarding school in Hampshire – Bedales – at the age of thirteen, I had, by my count, been to twelve schools, including two of the schools twice – yo-yoing between them – a school in Southern Ireland, and being home-schooled once. Sometimes Nick did not join me and I would attend for little more than a couple of weeks. Bedales was thirteen.

My father would follow his girlfriend, or an idea, or an apparent urge to move somewhere he could escape the associations of his past or forge a new and brighter future; there was never time to buy a uniform and I wouldn't be anywhere long enough to warrant the expenditure, so I was forever an oddity, not belonging. The other children would always have their friendship groups established at the point where I was propelled into their midst like a clumsy cuckoo in outgrown street clothes in the middle of a week, in the middle of a term, in the middle of a year. I learned two opposites; to make casual friends quickly, and to live without good friends at all. But any kind of friend didn't last long in any case, because I was never around to form a proper bond; as a result, even now, I have a strong desire to escape or run whenever a friendship begins to

mature, because my inner fear is that the friendship will somehow be snatched away when I least expect it, and I must prepare to be bereaved all over again. It is an echo from those years of travelling through England and Ireland, dangling from one of my father's hands, while Nick hung on to the other.

Nick appeared to simply endure the light-switch speed at which our daily environment could change – he was often mute and sullen and wouldn't engage – while I registered every aspect, every passing adult face, every room in every bed and breakfast, every father's friend's spare room, as if it were some kind of electrical pulse. Sometimes shocking.

Animals and birds were my other passion: they were unheard, just as I felt unheard; they needed someone to speak for them and anticipate their needs, just as I did. I had a belief that they could hear me thinking and that they identified with me as I identified with them. I felt I could trust them the way I did not feel I could trust human beings. Many human beings did not appear to have my best interests at heart, and the only person I really trusted was my father. Whereas I felt that I knew where I was with a ferret, cat, rabbit or a dog.

My belief as a small child was also that if I had a pet it should mean that I'd have found a home in which to be stationary; surely Dad would then stop moving around? In reality, having an animal didn't mean Dad would stay put at all, so I couldn't have pets in the proper sense that another little girl might be able to keep a rabbit or a pony or a dog. We had a goat once, that got pregnant and produced a bad-tempered Billy-the-kid when Dad took us away and left it with a local farmer, so it had to be rehomed. There was a tabby cat called 'Tabby' that accompanied many years of my childhood, but went feral because Dad kept taking us away and leaving it to the mercy of the neighbour. It would come home when we did. There was a stunningly beautiful white cat that was given to us as a

stray; it had to be rehomed because Dad thought it was bad luck (on the basis that black cats were lucky so white cats were the opposite), and when it bit a hole in my upper arm I was deprived of any powers of persuasion to change his mind. There was a Labrador puppy given to us by my Aunt Olwyn, who thought it would stay the size it was when she bought it. I can still hear my father wailing, 'Didn't you look at the size of his paws? They're huge! And they tell you that he's going to be a BIG DOG!' Peter only lasted a matter of weeks until Nick pulled his tail so hard it almost detached and the dog squealed in agony, and then bit Nick's lip badly enough to give Dad the excuse to give Peter away to the sound of my breaking heart. Guinea pigs in Yorkshire ate each other when my father took us away again and left the guinea-pig care to his father, who forgot to feed them. And, when I was thirteen, there was a badger called Bess that Dad rescued from a tiny cage in a pet shop, rehousing her in a shed in the yard where I found ways through marzipan and sliced cow-lungs to befriend her. Hugging a badger is like hugging a warm, squishy ball of muscle – a wombat in Australia feels a bit the same. The calm joy I felt at sitting on the straw-covered floor in Bess's shed, having her snuffle round me and lie in my lap of her own volition, made Bess the creature that I wanted to spend most time with.

But Bess had other ideas; the shed was made of cob, and although a cob wall is several feet thick, it is only mud and straw. It didn't take her too many weeks to dig her way to freedom. I was happy for her; I reasoned that she must have felt ready to go and be able to feed herself. The tadpoles that I kept in an enormous blue-and-white glazed bowl beneath my old iron bed were equally unsuccessful, because they eventually grew legs and I had to let them go; I couldn't bear the idea of someone vacuuming my bedroom and accidentally hoovering up half-developed frogs.

*

To have a 'forever home' – one where I could plant trees and not have to move and leave them behind, where I could own a dog, and not have to rehome it because I had to leave, where I could buy furniture and keep it because I wasn't going to live anywhere else – was what I longed for all my life. To be in a place where I could walk down the street in a nearby town and know at least three people to talk to before I got home. Stability, and a sense of permanence. I never had that as a child; the nearest thing was the physical being of my father. If my father was in the room, then he represented warmth and safety just in his very being, because he cared for and loved me and my little brother and made sure that we knew this. But during my early childhood he was not stationary, and I longed to be stationary, just so I would have time to put down those damn roots.

This ferocious desire meant that every time I bought a new home I wanted to make it THE LAST home, even though I knew – absolutely knew without a shadow of doubt – that it was only one of the many dwellings on my journey. My father was the first to point this out, giving voice to my uncomfortable secret inner admission.

However, I had to treat each new home as if it were 'the last' or I wouldn't pour my love and effort into it, which were the things that brought a profit and made it possible to buy another property, and fix it up, and another, and another, and so climb the property ladder, buying homes that other people didn't love, so that I could transform them into something desirable.

But I drew the line at the garden. I simply couldn't plant up the gardens, because I knew I'd never be able to take them with me. My last house in south-east London, which I bought as three derelict apartments and turned back into a magnificent Victorian family home while living in it with my then husband, sometimes with no kitchen or no bathroom, had a large garden that I left as lawn. When I designed and built a sunken terrace, I populated it with

scores of terracotta pots of plants, which I brought with me when I found THE house, THIS house in Mid Wales, where I have been living since 2004. By the time I moved, there were so many pots they required an entire truck of their own.

When that truck arrived in Mid Wales, I knew, for the first time in my life, that I would never have to move again. I had finally found a house that I could grow into, develop, reorganise, paint and write in, garden for, and fill with PETS. I only wished my father had been alive to see it.

Having imagined your heart's desire, imagine getting it. Achieving, by dint of effort and the passage of years, the very thing that you so longed for. Imagine the sheer intoxicating elation that it had, at last, come to pass. I was in a state of joy and disbelief that I had managed to buy this part-Georgian/part-Victorian hall in the once resplendent grounds of which a small hamlet had been built, leaving barely an acre of field as garden.

The hamlet consisted of three short dead-end roads – each one populated by between six and fifteen red-brick houses – a postbox, a pub and a railway-station house that had been converted into a home. Once, the trains stopped here and would take you all the way into London, 200 miles away. The old coach house and stables that once belonged to the hall had been converted into ten little apartments, and beyond the hamlet were farms, smallholdings, other hamlets and the River Severn.

The hall itself had an imposing frontage, but inside it was in dire need of plumbing and wiring, the replastering of ceilings and walls, and the replacement of several windows. In the meantime, it was habitable. It was semi-detached with a neighbouring smaller building, which was once the kitchens, dairy, pantry, scullery and servants' quarters for the big house, and was now owned by a rather lovely woman in her seventies called Jean.

The fact that the house sat on only an acre was good for me; it was enough to construct an interesting garden, but not so big that I would need to borrow sheep to keep the grass down.

I moved here with my husband on 30 June 2004. We had met eight years earlier, when I was living in Australia, just before moving back to England the following year when my father had cancer. He died a year later, but I never returned to Australia to live. I wanted to stop moving. I wanted roots and I felt very strongly that they should be English roots, because England was where, even when living in Australia, I derived an income from my painting and writing.

In hindsight, I may have said things that persuaded my husband to think I might go back with him one day, although I fervently hoped that England would be enough for him to want to stay permanently, and that he'd find the kind of success as an artist that I knew he craved. Or perhaps he simply heard what he wanted to hear. In any case, the surface of the past closes over and never lets you visit the same place; when you return to somewhere in the past, it has moved and shifted and evolved, and life in it now would never be like the life you once had. So, I wanted to stay in Britain: I wanted to make friends and keep them, own dogs and have them die of old age in my ownership, develop the garden of my wildest dreams, and embellish my home with possessions that would keep me rooted.

From the beginning my husband always maintained that he wanted to go back to Australia when he was 'older'. I had imagined that 'older' meant ninety, or ninety-five, not sixty-five or seventy. Because, as he was already fourteen years my senior, I had the uneasy feeling that he was hankering to return even when we moved here. I pushed that fear of future upheaval to the back of my mind, hoping that the renovation of this house in Wales would somehow glue us together and take his mind off the longing. But just as I longed for my home, he longed for his.

I turned a blind eye even as our foundations crumbled, and ultimately, none of the things I hoped would save us were enough. In this book, although we were married, I refer to him as The Ex.

After our move into our new, very large, semi-detached 'fixer-upper', the proceeds of the sale of the London house gave us a certain financial boost, and, for a while, I felt almost as if I were on holiday, something that I'd rarely felt even when I *was* on holiday.

The move also gave me the physical and mental space to write and paint, which I'd longed for all my life, and a couple of years in, I started to write a weekly poetry column for *The Times*, which added to my financial security. I could hardly believe my good fortune and counted my blessings daily.

Every morning I'd drive to the tiny nearby town to buy a newspaper, find myself with a view of the valley beyond, and wonder at the sheer beauty of my surroundings. Then I'd return to the fixer-upper and be aghast and elated at the sheer size of the challenge, and feel deeply happy that this was my home now.

Shortly after we moved in, one of the locals was standing outside my house with me, looking at the patch of land I was digging holes in to form circular flowerbeds, almost all the garden being at the front. He and his wife owned a gift shop in the nearby town, which is how we'd met.

'How often are you going to be here?' he enquired, eyeing several mountainous heaps of rocks with which I was going to build raised flowerbeds, with the aid of a sack truck, a cement mixer that I'd had to assemble myself out of the box, a lot of enthusiastic optimism, and considerable disregard for my increasingly debilitating lower back pain.

I gazed up at him (he was very tall), slightly puzzled. 'I've moved here. Permanently,' I replied.

'No, I mean, how many days a week will you spend here?' he asked. I was confused. He explained that most people who moved to Wales from London went back during the week.

'I'm going to be here all the time,' I assured him firmly. He smiled.

'You'll last about two years, then,' he replied.

That was eighteen years ago.

By my third year in Wales, the Reader's Digest *New Encyclopedia of Garden Plants and Flowers* had become my bible. It was an unexpected gift from Aunt Olwyn. Olwyn wasn't prone to giving me presents, unless she had some ulterior motive: shoes that were too big for me (too uncomfortable for her), a scarf of golf-ball-sized rabbit-fur-covered pieces attached together (unwearable unwanted gift to Olwyn), a crochet mustard-coloured bikini that shrank in the sea and barely covered my modesty (and therefore had no hope at all of covering the much larger Olwyn's modesty). One year when she came to stay for Christmas and I collected her from the station, she presented me with my Christmas present on the platform: an empty balsa-wood box that had contained two pounds of glacé fruit (I *love* glacé fruit). A lifelong chain smoker until dementia rendered it impossible, she'd eaten the entire contents on her journey to Wales from London in an effort to assuage her cravings for a cigarette.

But the encyclopedia of plants was a joy to me; I pored over it whenever I stopped to eat a meal (three times a day), and I'd gleefully list the useful shrubs or flowers for my next garden-centre visit (three times a week at least) – I was totally addicted, and I knew it. This was also an addiction that I could, for a short while, afford to indulge.

Creating the garden gave me a tangible purpose, a sense of fulfilment, and, although I knew it couldn't last forever, I was going to

follow this obsession as far as it would go, not least because it was harmless, made me intensely happy, and was incredibly productive – albeit perhaps only in my own eyes. I experienced a deep satisfaction from watching plants take root, grow and multiply. And being outside, surrounded by nature, made the clamour of humanity subside. All other interests fell away and I became single-minded, rooted in dirt.

Certain forms of happiness are found by creating or identifying a need, finding out what is necessary to feed that need, then supplying it: I dug more and more circular flowerbeds, then bought plants to fill the new spaces. Oh, the sheer luxury of it! To fulfil a longing for ericaceous bushes and be able to buy not one, but ten at a discount. Camellias, hellebores and tsugas crowded the flowerbeds as fast as I could dig them. The word 'euonymus' filled me with affection for the little evergreen bush of soft, two-tone leaves of gold and green or cream and green.

I'd pick up a potted pieris and feel a sense of wonder at the delicate pink leaves at the end of otherwise green twigs; the smell of tulip bulbs was like catnip to me, and the mental image of a sweeping curve of miniature azaleas would set me off digging the trench for them.

At the Derwen Garden Centre, near Guilsfield, I was bewitched by their alphabetical rows of flowering trees and berried bushes, their hip-high tables of hellebores and euphorbias, and their pools of swamp-loving greenery. I finally gave up buying by the carload and saved up instead for a truckload at a time.

My desire to garden had been fermenting since that first childhood flowerbed of marigolds, and now I could channel all of my energy (or passion?) into this plot of land. The only things that limited me were the hours of darkness, unavoidable commitments, a certain amount of painting and writing, and the physical pain from my bad back. The garden was my daily destination and sometimes

threatened to take over even from my own work completely, because I kept thinking: when it is finished, I'll have more time to paint and write, but I'll be doing it in this extraordinary environment full of colour and life. Creating the garden had a visible end, whereas painting and writing were my lifelong companions; so, getting it finished to the point where there was no more room for landscaping or planting would, I thought, free me. Then, of course, I'd need someone to help me weed . . .

But I was unexpectedly interrupted three years into all of this, by the arrival of a tiny, feathered scrap who was going to instantly demand top billing on my priority list: enter George.

May

Saturday 19 May 2007

Working in the garden daily, I noticed a pair of magpies building a huge nest in the neighbour's copper-leafed prunus tree, which rose out of the hedge between our two gardens about 50 yards from the front of my house.

Twig by twisty twig, they knitted this wooden bag for their babies; it hung in the highest of the branches like a dark lantern, a testament to their skill at construction, a very large, twiggy nest, shaped like a tall, inverted pear, with a twiggy lid that was attached by a spine at the back, but sat above the rim to allow parental access from the sides while protecting it from the worst of the rain. I'd never seen anything quite like it.

The tree's heavy presence and purple-dark leaves were now made more threatening by the habitation of these magpies and their staccato laughter; their noise sounded as if hard wooden blocks were being thrown at a wall, so they clattered to the ground. Toiling beneath them as I dug narrow trenches for flowerbed-edging pavers, and planting hellebores and miniature azaleas, I had the idea that they were the jokers and we humans were their fools.

They screeched and made strange chugging noises; king and queen of the garden, they challenged the wood pigeons and doves and teased the jackdaws and crows without shame. They skipped

and flounced and appeared hideously happy as they performed their quick little dance steps, wearing their black-and-white shiny suits with that tinge of oil-slick blue-green like a stain on their inky feathers. Where crows possessed gravitas, jackdaws possessed curiosity, and magpies possessed a tangible sense of humour.

Magpies are vermin, I was told by farmers and friends alike, and anyone who cared to voice an opinion, as if they *knew* all about magpies. Their seemingly universal verdict sounded trite and rehearsed rather than being a warranted judgement that any one of them had come up with on their own. So, I disagreed with them, but nevertheless, when the twelve wild duck eggs started to vanish from the nest on the island in the middle of the large fishpond I'd constructed, I began to regard the magpie nest with some suspicion.

Every morning I'd find another egg missing, and broken bits of shell littering the pond edge. It seemed the egg-eater was coming for an egg a day. Three eggs into the carnage, the duck stopped sitting and deserted the nest; the eggs continued to disappear until there were none left. It was magpies, someone told me, although in truth it could have been any number of creatures: crows, ravens, ferrets, mink, foxes, rats. Even lovable hedgehogs crave a raw egg and there are several of them in my garden. Jackdaws eat eggs too; sometimes I'd look out of the kitchen window and there would be eight or a dozen of them perched on the table and benches that stood on the bit of grass I called 'the front lawn'. (I've since turned it into a rockery and series of winding flowerbeds full of low-growing evergreen bushes.)

The jackdaws and crows hung around the front yard like mourners waiting for the funeral in their sooty blacks, but I liked them; they had dignity and poise, unlike the magpies who were imps. If I put bread out for the birds, the big black crows would fly over, their slow, powerful wingbeats bringing them down like burnt-out space junk until they littered the crumbling tarmac of the circular

forecourt, where they got on with the business of devouring bread. The jackdaws would step aside for their larger cousins. But the magpies would sidle in, cackling and fizzing, hyper-energetic and focused on food.

The bread had to be brown; I was amused to find that the birds ignored white bread altogether, which festered outside, becoming soggy heaps in the first rain and eventually washing away as a sort of greying, diluting slime. Even the rats and mice weren't interested.

The night before, there had been fierce winds. Inside the house the windows had felt to be shaking free of their box frames, their weights rattling inside their hidden sash-coffins. The large house, beaten by the storm, gave me a sense of being in a ship on a wild sea. Our bedroom on the third floor at the back was like the bridge; looking out over the neighbours and forging a path through the stormy skies. The slimmer trees had leaned and bowed, the bigger ones had lost branches, and now here, when I looked up, was the broken, torn-apart tatter of the magpie twig-nest.

Good, I thought firmly, no more magpie nest meant no more magpie eggs, so fewer magpies to eat duck eggs. Even as the thoughts crossed my mind, I felt a stab of guilt; I'd damned them without evidence, and I've spent so much of my life rescuing wounded birds and animals (a compulsion begun in childhood, which eventually grew to include friends, boyfriends and derelict houses), trying to patch them up and keep them alive until they mended, that being glad of the destruction of the nest, and the eggs that could have been inside it, was alien to me.

There was no sign of the magpie pair. They had simply vanished.

In the raised rockery beds that I'd built adjacent to the tree, a small feathered scrap caught my eye. I parted the foliage around it and found an injured baby magpie; it was almost the size of my palm – too young to walk or fly, and with only the most rudimentary feathers. Its stumpy wings were like a bundle of fan-sticks

still awaiting fluff. So, the magpie eggs had already hatched. Immediately, I wanted to save it.

Although I've picked up various injured birds over the years, I've only ever seen baby birds when they've fallen out of the nest, already dead. This little thing was just about alive and in desperate need of care.

The baby magpie's open beak was full of fly eggs, which didn't bode well for the bird. I gently flushed the eggs out under a dribble from the outdoor tap; the bird was bleeding in patches all over its body, and I guessed the neighbour's cat must have had a go at it – it looked torn in places, like a bloodied rag. I took it indoors and gave it a lukewarm bath to flush out the fly eggs from the wounds on the rest of its body; I had to use a tiny watercolour paintbrush to get the fly eggs out of its nostrils. I didn't know what else to do, but I remembered clearly how quickly fly eggs can turn into maggots, and the idea of any egg hatching, eating flesh as a maggot before becoming a chrysalis from which would emerge a fly, made gigantic by the minuteness of its tiny, flesh surroundings, revolted me. I made sure I fished out every single one.

When I was a small child my father, who was a fanatical fisherman, forgot that he'd left a tin of maggots on the dashboard of his old black Morris Traveller. In the summer heat they turned into flies in record time, exploding the top of the old tobacco tin he'd put them in as the bulk of their bodies swelled up like miniature Hulks, clouding the interior of the car with tiny black shiny pissed-off engine-driven lunatics. When he opened the car door my father was engulfed in a cloud of quickly dispersing fizzing black dots, and I was engulfed in peals of laughter, tempered only by a sense of revulsion at the seething mass.

The magpie chick didn't fight or struggle; on the contrary, it put up with my ministrations with the air of a creature that no longer cares. I dried it off, and got it to eat a small worm, which I dangled

into its open upturned beak and dropped to the back of its throat, so it swallowed. Then I wrapped it up warmly in a T-shirt and put it in a small cardboard box. I left it to recover and hoped it might, although given its condition I had my doubts. If it lived, I'd call it George.

The sun was blazing down; it was a hot day and I didn't want to miss the weather for planting, so I got back outside as soon as I thought George was settled and there was nothing more that I could do for him; his little head was sunken on his tiny chest and he appeared to be sleeping.

I was planting miniature azaleas beneath a couple of tall silver birches at the bottom of the garden, far away from the spot where I'd found the magpie chick, when I heard a single desperate cry. It wasn't plaintive at all, but demanding and outraged. I searched the bushes and leaves at my feet and found a second baby magpie. It was cold and dead. Puzzled, since it couldn't have been the source of the noise, I buried it beneath one of the cupressus trees I'd planted, and searched again, for the source of the bird call.

Thinking that it might have been my imagination – or a sound from something on the other side of the hedge, out on the road – I got on with shovelling earth, wondering how many weeks it would be necessary to find worms for the baby bird before it could feed itself. I made my way back down to the bottom of the garden where I started filling a jar with the worms I dug up. It didn't occur to me to look up worm suppliers on the internet, because my internet connection in those days was so slow that I could barely send an email, let alone access useful information. So, I'd ask someone who knew, or I'd wait to find out, and until then, I'd dig worms.

I was turning over spadeful after spadeful of the dried leaves and woodchips that covered the ground 6 inches deep, when suddenly another, quite deafening shriek tore right through my eardrum; I had been about to dig the spade into the earth by my feet, but now

stopped. Bewildered, I searched through the leaves and debris on the ground, my fingers digging deep, safe in the confines of my black Marigold rubber gloves, which, in the heat of the day, had filled with sweat from my hands so my fingernails were paddling in pools forming at the fingertips of the gloves, but I could still see nothing. Then, just in time, right there by the toe of my boot, next to the blade of my spade and camouflaged by the leaves on the ground, was a third magpie chick. It squatted belligerently, peering up at me with magpie fury. I realised that I might have cut it in two had it not made a noise.

With cheery visions of rearing magpie twins, I took it back to the house and wrapped it up in the T-shirt nest with its sibling. It didn't struggle. It reminded me of one of those plump, rounded toys that are weighted at the bottom; you can knock them over and they always swing up again, but they don't possess the means to walk.

For a while I had happy thoughts of naming them Samson and Delilah and waving them off to freedom in tandem when old enough, but when I came back later to check on my two guests I found the first chick was dead. If only I could have found it before the cat and the fly eggs . . . if only I had a magic wand.

I fervently hoped that rinsing the fly eggs off the first bird had not contributed to its death, although when I remembered those fly eggs I really believed that I had no choice but to remove anything that might become a maggot. This thought didn't stop me berating myself, however: should I not have bathed it? Should I not have cleaned all the fly eggs off it? Could I have got to it before the cat did? Was it too warm? Or not warm enough?

The second chick was leaning away from its sibling as if disgusted. The little corpse must have been getting chilly to cuddle up to. I extracted the dead chick and buried it next to its other sibling beneath the twisty cupressus, seething with frustration at not knowing what would have made the difference between its life and death.

I should have kept it warmer; I should have toasted it in the bottom oven of the Rayburn. I should have tucked it into my shirt so that it felt as if it were being mothered. Perhaps then it would have had more of a chance. But of course, shock is the real killer. Shock, and cats.

In my early twenties, I took in unwanted cats – I loved those cats and ended up with thirteen of them before I managed to rehome them all. But they killed things, and after living in Australia in my thirties and seeing cats kill so many of the indigenous marsupials, I went right off cats altogether.

Now I was determined to try and save the third bird. I chose not to think about how people would judge me bringing up a bird held in such high disregard.

Magpie food became a preoccupation all afternoon; I worked my way through planting azaleas and denuding the garden of worm life, small slugs and a couple of woodlice. Every so often I'd take a break to feed George. (Who could just as easily have been Georgina: the name moved from the dead bird to the survivor; I like to recycle.) He'd raise his head on a neck that looked a foot long in comparison to his tiny, squat body, and open his mouth with an ear-splitting screech when he wanted food.

In the process of answering George's dietary calls, I discovered an interesting thing about worms: they genuinely didn't want to die; they didn't think that a bird's gullet was a nice, moist hole to slip into, so they fought like hell to escape George's eager beak, twisting and writhing as I tried to dangle them into his throat. It was as if they were all eyes and aware of impending doom.

It wasn't long before I developed the knack of pushing the end of the worm down George's throat with the tip of my finger, and quickly shoving the rest of it into his jaw, before the other end of the worm got a curling grip on the side of his beak and hauled itself out. I noticed the back of the magpie's tongue had a sort of

two-pronged ledge that pointed down into its throat, as if to deter anything living that might want to scramble out again.

If worms had only a single thought in their little nematode bodies, it was that they wanted to LIVE.

The really big worms (and I found a couple of whoppers about 5 inches long) were so strong that it was almost impossible to get their whole length into the bird before they forced his beak open to effect their escape. And they could move fast. I caught one fleeing from a high-sided bowl and slithering rapidly across the kitchen worktop. Perhaps it would have been better to chop them up, but whenever I accidentally cut them in half with a spade, it made me cringe terribly, as if I expected to feel the cut myself. And they wriggled in apparent agony – not that being digested alive in a bird's