

By *Angela Carter*

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THE MAGIC TOYSHOP

Angela Carter



or Aunt Gertrude, she would never have known Francie and Aunt Margaret and Finn. And Finn.

Melanie put on her own sweater. The new wool tickled her but it was blessedly snug, with a deep collar that rolled around her throat. It seemed to warm her with more than wool, as if Mrs Rundle had purled and plained some of her love into it with every stitch. She was grateful for it, for the house was sunk deep in midwinter. The few electric fires seemed to intensify the cold rather than dispel it. These December days, Aunt Margaret's pointed nose was always a little red at the tip. But Melanie did not even need a cardigan over her June sky coloured sweater. She would write to Mrs Rundle and say thank you. She thought of Mrs Rundle's hairy moles; they were a significant and beautiful memory.

To her surprise, there was a special dinner, a roast goose, materialising unexpectedly on the table attended by a bowl of apple sauce like a ghost of Christmas past. Aunt Margaret must have ordered it secretly by herself, as a surprise. Old Scrooge Uncle Philip frowned when he saw it and plunged the carving knife into its belly so fiercely that the stuffing spurted on the best damask tablecloth and Aunt Margaret had to scoop it back up with a spoon. He attacked the defenceless goose so savagely he seemed to want to kill it all over again, perhaps feeling the butcher had been incompetent in the first place and Aunt Margaret had not cooked it in a hot enough oven to finish it off. The reeking knife in his hand, he gazed reflectively at Finn. For a moment, Melanie feared he had merely been trying out the fatal blow on the goose and now, action perfect, would use it on Finn. But in the end all he did was to serve Finn a mean portion of skin and bone which Finn pushed moodily around his plate with his fork, not eating. Uncle Philip made a hearty meal and gnawed on the bones like Henry VIII. It was a gloomy table and they did not linger over it.

And all over London, men and women in hats of coloured paper were watching the Queen's speech on television, cracking walnuts and toasting one another in tawny port. It was hardly to be believed when, in this house, Uncle Philip and Finn and Jonathon went back to the work-room as soon as the mincepies and brandy butter were eaten, without zest. Aunt Margaret took out the chiffon tunic once the dishes were washed to put the finishing touches to the criss-crossing ribbons. Victoria was playing with a saucepan, banging it with a wooden spoon. There was brandy butter, already, on her pink woolly cuffs. She beat a tattoo and yelled. Melanie's head began to ache.

'The house is full of toys and Uncle Philip won't even give Victoria something she can play with quietly,' she thought resentfully. She tried not to look at the tunic because it made her think of the unknown and unknowing swan which was to ravish her the next day. She was scared of the very idea of the swan. The afternoon stifled her. Victoria hit her saucepan and chanted snatches of song and Aunt Margaret stroked her little head lovingly. They were so happy together. Melanie's headache grew worse. She slipped up to her room but Francie was playing slow airs, and phrases of music padded about her on small, soft, melancholy feet and she thought her heart was breaking. She did not know what to do to with herself. She picked the dead yellow leaves of the geranium and crumbled them to fragrant dust between her fingers. She stared at her hand. Four fingers and a thumb. Five nails.

'This is my hand. Mine. But what is it for?' she thought. 'What does it mean?'

Her hand seemed wonderful and surprising, an object which did not belong to her and of which she did not know the use. The fingers were people, the members of a family. The thumb the father, short and thick-set, probably a Northcountryman, with flat, assertive vowels in his speech, and the forefinger the mother, a tall, willow lady, of

middle-class origins, who said: 'dahling' frequently and ate dessert oranges with a knife and fork. Had he married above his station, in the flush of self-made money? He had the bluff, upright stance of a man who has made his own way in the world. And three fine children, two full grown, a big boy and girl, and one just coming into its teens. She flexed her hand, and, obligingly, the family performed a brief dance for her. Then she was horrified.

'I must be going crazy!' In this crazy house, as Finn said he would, she, too, was going mad. She wrapped up her head in the curtains so as not to hear Francie playing and not see the room darken as it approached tomorrow. She felt the round world spinning towards the new day and carrying her, infinitely small, furious, reluctant, with it. She saw herself, minute, standing on the schoolroom globe of the world and it turning in vast, silent space and once again felt she was teetering on the edge of sanity. But did people have nervous breakdowns at fifteen going on sixteen? Well, she must be the first, unique. There was a swan over her head, dangling there like the sword of Damocles, following her wherever, insignificant as dust, she was blown by cross currents of fearful winds.

'Oh, I must not be afraid of the swan. It is all charades.'

But it was not precisely the swan of which she was afraid but of giving herself to the swan.

When her hair was done next day and she was dressed in the tunic, Victoria filled her sticky hands with chiffon and exclaimed: 'Pretty lady! Pretty lady!'

'Do you really think so?' said Melanie wistfully, as if Victoria's opinion counted or as if being pretty was a kind of protection.

'Yes,' said Victoria emphatically, round as a fruit in her fruit-coloured sweater. Aunt Margaret, pinning the flowers in Melanie's hair, nodded as hard as her collar would let her. She was wearing her straight grey dress and looked like a Doric column. But her hair was not skewered up quite so

firmly as it usually was when she wore her best clothes and a stray lock fell down beside her ear, giving her an incongruous, faintly raffish air. She must have been too preoccupied to fasten her hair properly. She and the rest of them were so clean and Sunday-dressed, so nice and clothed that Melanie felt improper, like a chorus-girl taking Holy Communion in fishnet tights. So she was in show-business, now.

'I'm under-rehearsed,' she said, quaking.

'You'll do fine,' said Francie. 'Don't shilly shally, girly, it's nearly curtain-up time.'

'Oh, Francie,' she said and gulped. He patted her chiffon rump encouragingly.

'His bark is worse than his bite.'

She had heard this of her Uncle Philip before but she did not believe it. She thought, wincing, of what he might do to her if she performed badly, thought of her fresh blood staining the little stage. But when he saw her, he seemed sufficiently satisfied with her appearance, at least; he looked her up and down and said: 'All right. Get behind the curtains.' He looked huge in his dinner jacket and striped trousers, a bull. Perhaps he was a bull. Fire spurting from his nostrils, he was going to turn into Jove as a bull and, myths all awry, carry her off as Europa across this painted sea where dolphins sported. She was on edge and imagining all sorts of things.

There were only three chairs set, this time, since Melanie was no longer in the audience. The 'NO SMOKING' sign was on the curtains but a re-designed poster proclaimed: 'GRAND XMAS NOVELTY SHOW—art and nature combine with Philip Flower to bring you a Unique Phenomenon.' And Uncle Philip, surrounded by a dwarfish ring of skipping young girls, held aloft a pretty swan on strings.

The stage was a neat box with one red side and one sea side and a frame over the top with lights, where Finn sat grimly on his haunches like a toad. His face was black,

blank and ill-tempered. She could not see the swan anywhere. It must be somewhere in the wings. The stage was strewn with innumerable shells of all shapes and sizes, clam shells, big, round, pearly shells, little, viciously pronged shells. On the other side of the curtain, in another dimension, Aunt Margaret and the children were taking their seats for the spectacle. Melanie stood in the middle of the shells. She felt a fool.

'Take your clodhopping shoes off, you silly bitch!' Uncle Philip was climbing a short ladder up to Finn. Melanie was still wearing the heavy, lace-up shoes which she had put on to walk downstairs. They must look absurd, with the tunic. She kicked off her shoes and threw them into the wings. She felt far more undressed without her shoes on.

The light went through a kaleidoscopic series of colour changes, as if Finn were trying out the whole battery of his effects. She tried to calm her nerves by thinking of something else, something nice, fluffy kittens, potato-scones for tea; but, oddly, the thought of such things made her want to cry. She began to recite the multiplication tables to herself, in order to make time pass. Over her head, Finn and Uncle Philip rustled and murmured.

'Music!'

Outside the red wall, Francie began to play selections from 'Swan Lake' in the style of 'Grand Hotel' on Sunday night radio. 'What else,' she thought, repressing a sudden desire to giggle, 'what else.' It was comforting to feel superior to Uncle Philip's mediocrity. He must have a taste for Tchaikovsky, for he nodded his heavy head in time. He rustled a script in his hand and read out:

'Leda gathers shells by the shore in the approaching dusk; little does she know that Almighty Jove has picked her out to be his mate.'

Finn threw a switch and the stage was filled with a brownish gloaming. A spotlight transfixed her. Uncle Philip hissed: 'Get started, what's yer name!'

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She spread out her skirts and put shells into it, bending and rising, bending and rising, accompanied by the spotlight, while the curtains opened. There was Francie with his fiddle under his chin. There was her aunt and her brother and sister all applauding. It was like the school play. She had been an angel in the nativity play at school, this time last year, also in white draperies, but with a cardboard halo on her head. She picked up her shells.

'But what shall I do with them all?' she thought. She found out when Uncle Philip beat unexpectedly on a metal sheet with a padded stick, simulating thunder; startled, she dropped the lot. And the swan came on, then.

It was almost as tall as she, an egg-shaped sphere of plywood painted white and coated with glued-on feathers. She guessed its long neck was made of rubber, since it bent and swayed with an unnerving life of its own. Its head and beak, however, were carved of wood, with black glass eyes inset. The beak was painted with gold paint. The wings were constructed on the principle of the wings of model aeroplanes, but curved; arched struts of thin wood with an overall covering of feathered white paper. Its black legs were tucked up beneath it. It was a grotesque parody of a swan; Edward Lear might have designed it. It was nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings. It was dumpy and homely and eccentric. She nearly laughed again to see its lumbering progress. But she ran away from it as she was supposed to do, treading on shells, which cut her bare feet.

Its wings waved because Uncle Philip was pulling the strings. It followed her, jerking its mindless beak this way and that. The little audience was applauding again. The swan lowered its legs, a model aeroplane coming in to land. 'That is clever,' thought Melanie. It landed with a light thump on its two webbed feet, which were made of p.v.c. She halted, at a loss what to do next. It waddled purposefully towards her. She prayed for a cue. Uncle Philip read out:

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'Leda attempts to flee her heavenly visitant but his beauty and majesty bear her to the ground.'

'Well, I must lie down,' she thought and, kicking aside shells, went down on her knees. Like fate or the clock, on came the swan, its feet going splat, splat, splat. She thought of the horse of Troy, also made of hollow wood; if she did not act her part well, a trapdoor in the swan's side might open and an armed host of pigmy Uncle Philips, all clockwork, might rush out and savage her. This possibility seemed real and awful. All her laughter was snuffed out. She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place; and, in this staged fantasy, anything was possible. Even that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality itself and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers. The swan towered over the black-haired girl who was Melanie and who was not. Its empty body was white and light as meringue, its head bobbed this way and that way on its prehensile neck. The music throbbed to an excruciating climax.

She had last heard the 'Swan Lake' music a couple of years before, also at Christmas, sitting in a red plush fauteuil at Covent Garden Opera House, when her father took her to the ballet for an end-of-term treat. The white figures turned and twirled around her. She had been fond of ballet for a time. Now she herself was on stage with an imitation swan. The swan settled its belly on her feet. She felt it. Looking up, she could see Uncle Philip directing its movements. His mouth gaped open with concentration. She noticed that his black bow tie had glossy spots in the fabric which caught the light and shone. She shifted under the rustling swan, whose wings now beat strongly, stirring her hair. A daisy blew away. She could see nothing, after this, except the flourey glare of the spotlight.

'Almighty Jove in the form of a swan wreaks his will.'
Uncle Philip's voice, deep and solemn as the notes of an

organ, moved dark and sonorous against the moaning of the fiddle. The swan made a lumpish jump forward and settled on her loins. She thrust with all her force to get rid of it but the wings came down all around her like a tent and its head fell forward and nestled in her neck. The gilded beak dug deeply into the soft flesh. She screamed, hardly realising she was screaming. She was covered completely by the swan but for her kicking feet and her screaming face. The obscene swan had mounted her. She screamed again. There were feathers in her mouth. She heard the curtains swish to amid a patter of applause and thought it was the sound of the sea.

After a gap of consciousness, she found that Finn was kneeling beside her, pulling her skirt decently down for her. The passionate swan had dragged her dress half off. Finn's face was set. She looked at him as if he were a stranger in tartan wool shirt-sleeves and worn-out corduroy trousers and unshaven stubble. 'He has nice ears,' she thought, noticing them for the first time. They were small and elegantly shaped ears. She tried to recall where she had seen him before; his face was familiar. But it was too hard and she gave up. She looked round for her swan. It had been hauled away. It hung on its strings, pathetic now its motive power was gone, waving about a little from side to side.

'Everything is all right,' said Finn. 'The play is over.'

Then she recognised Finn. Of course, he painted things and was her friend, whatever that was. She put Melanie back on like a coat, slowly. Uncle Philip came puffing and blowing down the ladder and brusquely ordered Finn back to the lights.

'You overacted,' he said to Melanie and cuffed her with the back of his hand. 'You were melodramatic. Puppets don't overact. You spoiled the poetry.'

Her face stinging, she said: 'The swan upset me.' But he did not hear. He was arranging his bow tie. The stage

flooded with brightness. She, Uncle Philip, and the swan received a tumultuous ovation. They seemed to go on for hours, bowing and curtsying and fielding paper roses thrown by her aunt, until her uncle shouted: 'House-lights!' and the curtains closed for the last time. He switched off his beaming smile at once. He put his arms round the neck of the limp swan.

'Well done, old fellow,' he said to it. The wooden head lolled.

'Is there anything more?' asked Melanie. She was trembling and sick with anti-climax.

'No. Clear off.'

She retrieved her shoes and went. Aunt Margaret and Francie kissed her and Francie said: 'You did fine, just fine.' It was all over. She had made her debut. She was alive again. There were feathers in her hair and she was dusty. She brushed her hair, removed the daisies and the feathers and put on her everyday skirt and her new sweater, which put friendly arms around her. Yet she still felt detached, apart.

For tea, they had a chocolate Yule log with a tiny sugar robin on top, which Victoria took and ate. The cake seemed extremely exotic and unlikely, a figment of the imagination. She ate her slice but tasted nothing. The company round the tea-table was as distorted and alien as its miniature in the witch-ball. She watched Uncle Philip empty four green-banded cups of tea and thought of the liquid turning slowly to urine through his kidneys; it seemed like alchemy, he could transmute liquids from one thing to another. He could also turn wood into swans. There was chocolate icing on his moustache; what would he turn it into? She waited, rapt. His silence had bulk, a height and a weight. It reached from here to the sky. It filled the room. He was heavy as Saturn. She ate at the same table as this elemental silence which could crush you to nothing.

Yet her eyes returned again and again to the plausible distortion of the witch-ball. She found herself wondering which was the real tea-table and which was the reflection. The chocolate icing on her knife was no empirical evidence, the lacquered paper holly sprig on the cake was itself artificial. Everything was flattened to paper cut-outs by the personified gravity of Uncle Philip as he ate his tea. She felt she cast no shadow.

She could not remember how the evening passed, but it must have passed somehow for then she was in bed, inhabiting a grey no-man's-land between sleeping and waking. Victoria, happy Victoria who still lived in the land of Beulah where milk and honey flow, an Eden where the snake still slumbers in futurity, mindless Victoria slept like a top, but Melanie heard a scratching at the door. She did not believe it and pretended she was asleep in her striped sheets at home and the apple tree blooming with frost outside. Nevertheless, the scratching went on. She opened her eyes.

A finger of moonlight poked through the curtains and rested on the end of the bed, illuminating a mound which, after a moment, she was relieved to perceive to be her feet. Scrabble, scrabble, scrabble on the door; then a whisper: 'It's Finn here. I want to talk to you.'

She lay in lavender and Finn wanted to talk to her. She tried to see the logic of this but failed.

'Come in, if you want,' she said letting herself drift on the tide.

But was it Finn or not? It was too dark to see and the whisper was anonymous, a metallic rasp. She had an uneasy time as the shadowy figure made its way around the room to her bed, treading the noiseless dark like a swimmer. But the breathing was Finn's. It must be. It sounded like a musical saw. No two people could breathe that way. He crouched by the bed. He smelt like Finn. No two people could smell that way. But there was a wild overtone of night on him and