



2019 Highly Commended

Fat Baby

by

Alison Marr

About the Author page 13

Copyright © 2019 Alison Marr

All rights reserved

Copying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests from the publisher & author, write to:
hello@spreadtheword.org.uk

www.spreadtheword.org.uk



Fat Baby

‘I should have drowned you in a bucket at birth,’ my father said. He was plucking a swan at the living room table. Its feathers whirled around the room from the wind howling under the doors and through the gaps in the windows. A force ten gale battered our old house till it creaked and groaned. The lough lashed the garden. I was eleven years old and could not stop crying. The swan’s poor neck dangled from the table and I could see its little black eyes. I was so sorry for it even though it was not one of the swans who lived in the bay and to whom I’d given names.

‘Stop bawling Alice, its roadkill. If I hadn’t got it someone else would have, isn’t that right Jessy?’

‘Aye,’ said my mother, ‘at least it’s not jumping with fleas like that badger you brought home, I had to borrow your Granny’s vacuum cleaner to get rid of the wee shites,’ she looked like an antique ballerina, feathers had fastened to her head and shoulders as she sat crocheting by the fire. There was an acrid scorching smell as the beautiful white feathers flew up the chimney.

I was sleeping on the sofa for I had pneumonia and our house was freezing and the coal fire in the living room the only source of heat. I had caught pneumonia by deliberately standing in the freezing lough in November to get off school and it had worked spectacularly well as I was so ill I got to stay home for two months. My best friend had bitten a bar of soap but she got whacked when her mother saw the teeth marks and her bubbly boak and had to go back the following day. But now I felt shivery and a great big lump in my throat hurt and I could not stand to look at the plucked swan any longer and lay down and tried to sleep. The wind roared and wailed

all night and I thought how it sounded like the sad cry of the swan looking for her mate. I imagined her out on the lake in the dark, cold waters searching the reed banks for her dear love. I didn't mind my father saying he should have drowned me at birth. He said it to each of his children at least once a week and it was almost like an endearment.

I was born as the one o'clock flax-mill horn sounded. The doctor hoisted me up by one foot and announced, 'She's ten pounds if she's an ounce.' I was a huge baby all larded and dimpled with fat. It was the first day of July and the Christmas decorations were still up. A flute band was marching past our house, in commemoration of the Battle of the Somme and my elder brother and sister had climbed in through the bedroom window to gaze at me. A photograph of me aged six months shows a gormless looking infant with tyre mechanic arms in a silk smocked gown. I am sitting on a rug on a silver floor. In my early memories the rooms of our house are painted green and silver. My father had somehow acquired paint from his employers, the *Ulster Transport Association* and our house was painted in the bright colours of the Ulster buses that roamed the green roads of the province.

I think I had a happy childhood. It was certainly vivid. We lived in a windy cottage on the shores of Strangford Lough. I knew my mother loved me as did my father in his own demented way. He was a handsome, angry man given to violent rages. He made us nervous but could be joyful too; singing Neapolitan love songs as he dismantled his motor bike on the living-room floor; letting us ride on his back as he galloped across the linoleum on all-fours. In his glory days, before he went to war, he used to ride the *Wall of Death* in Dublin, sometimes he'd get a notion and ride his bike horizontally along the shore wall and amaze us all by not falling off. He joined

the Eighth Army and fought in the Italian campaign and like most men of that generation rarely talked about the war but he would let us play with the three bullet holes in his chest. He had a sharp, caustic wit and had a posse of fledgling, existential drinkers who copied his style and after his death poured libations of whisky into his grave.

There was always an element of the surreal in our house, one night my father fell into the harbour while fixing the engine of a boat. He was a mechanic. When his water-boots filled up with water he just sat down on the bottom, took them off and floated up. After he told me this story he sat down on the couch and pulled a live fish out of his pocket and gave it to me. He'd often bring lobsters home and let them clack and scabble about the floor before boiling them up slowly in the pot. I hated their thin, frantic screams. He adored eating offal and tripe in milk and the sexual organs of most creatures as well as roadkill of all persuasions.

I had a free-range childhood, roaming the village from an early age, in the summer swimming or playing on the rocky beach of the sea-lough, collecting stones, glass and wood and in the winter hugging the fire with a book. From a boat on the lough the village looked homely: coal smoke above the line of white houses, the mill chimney, the church spires and above them, at the top of the town, the castle's towers and battlements. Some of my relatives had boats and we would row out to the islands, of which there were three hundred and sixty five, although many of them were covered at high tide. At low tide we'd visit the Town Rock to see the graveyard of the kittens and puppies, drowned in sacks, now in heaps of little skeletons on the rocks. Later, their tiny skulls formed the nucleus of my collection.

We had magnificent solstice storms, when the sea would heave itself over the shore wall and flood the road and we'd find fish and seaweed in the garden – once

even an outraged mermaid, fighting with our cat in the fuchsia hedge, over a fish. Coal boats came with low hoots and moored out in the deep water beyond the Town Rock until the tide turned and allowed them harbour where they would dump hills of shiny black coal.

Our village had many idiots and savants. My cousin had dead rats for sale; she would trim them down to fit sardine tins and charge a penny a piece. She only sold one. There was an old country woman whose arm had been eaten by pigs when she was a baby. She wore a long black gabardine and her sleeve flapped in the wind. She had a very straight back and drew herself up even taller when ordering her messages in White's grocery store. I used to stare at the flapping sleeve and imagine the pigs snuffling round her pram and eating her arm and her high baby screams and only the east wind to hear her agony.

I had an old wind-up-gramophone and records my mother got in a jumble sale and I used to get Janey to carry it around the shore to the jetty. Janey lived in a field behind a forest of whin bushes with her grandfather, in a beehive house. She never went to school and wore cloaks and a tall black hat with crow feathers. She adored old coins and, as my mother had a brass chest full of ancient and foreign currency, I would pay her with Victorian bun pennies and in exchange she would wind the gramophone up while I swam. I loved listening to the scratchy antique music over the water. I remember the high voice of Dame Nelly Melba and the guttural bark of Marlene Deitrich. Afterwards I would skim the Bakelite 78 records - they were fantastic and could go about ten or twelve skims before sinking. I expect they are still lying there, pristine, beside the bladder wrack and the crabs. That was before the Troubles started.

Almost everyone fished but my mother hated all the free fish as she always had to gut and cook them. It was another chore for her and she had already such a hard, thwarted life. Our house in the summer stank of cigarettes and fish. There always seemed to be a crackling fire in the grate, for our living room faced away from the sea and was always dark and slightly sinister, especially on fine afternoons when struck by the setting sun in a kind of blood light.

I have always been terrified of spiders. They are just so alien. So extra. How many legs or eyes does a creature need? There were loads of big hairy ones in our ramshackle house, mostly in the outside toilet where we had to squelch to in our water-boots. I'd scream and scream when I saw one until, the offending creature was either killed or removed, or an eager relative would give me an obliging slap for hysteria. Rats used to come up the rotting floorboards from the beach but I didn't mind them so much as they were discreetly legged and reasonably well behaved – some of them could even read, well I once saw one reclining at the bottom of my bed reading my diary. One winter morning I looked over the shore wall and saw a family of poisoned rats, their paws frozen in fascist salutes and I felt quite sorry for the poor, deluded fools.

My siblings and I were weaned on ghost stories, we interpreted everything in terms of portents of the supernatural world. If the door was knocked three times then someone close to us would die and if the door opened by itself it was never the wind but always a ghost. My father's aunt had come up from Dublin to die on our sofa. She lay expiring, theatrically, for two years and used to play cruel tricks on my insomniac mother by pretending to be dead when Mammy would rise, in the wolf hours, to chain smoke *Woodbines*. Aunty would lie stark-staring-stiff with unfocused eyes and baited breath and my poor mother would run and wait in the icy porch until dawn gave her

the courage to return to the living room, which she had to go through, to get to the kitchen. Each night when my father left for the pub Aunty would cry, *I'll be dead when you get back, and then you'll be sorry*. No-one took her seriously but one night she was dead when he returned. My mother had never witnessed a death before and she told us how Aunty had died from the ankles up – how a big death stain had crept up her legs, over her ulcers and up until it reached her face when Aunty sat bolt upright, let out a great big gulder and died. ‘We’d to sit up all-night to make sure she wasn’t pretending - you know what she was like,’ Mammy said, ‘I wanted to tie bells on her fingers and toes, just in case, but your Da wouldn’t let me.’

I sometimes went to stay with my cousins who lived in a yacht club where my uncle was caretaker. It was like an Art Deco ocean liner, built on a rock with great curved windows overlooking the sea. It was a bleak and lonely place in the winter, abandoned by the cream of Ulster’s sailing community. It used to boom when the tide entered its cellars and floated the beer barrels. It had two ghosts, one of them was an evil Troll toy brought back from Norway and given to my cousin by their mysterious Norwegian neighbour (who later became a ghost herself) and the other was a malevolent baby who wailed and scratched their windows with its infant nails. The Troll was relentless. My cousin tried to get rid of it many times but it always came back. The first time she threw it out of a car window at speed but it was back that night in the kitchen cupboard, another time she left it behind in Woolworth’s in Belfast but she woke to find it smirking at her from the bedside table. Finally she filled the Troll up with stones and dropped it into the deepest part of the lough. It must have worked for she never mentioned it again. The ghostly baby got more and more irritating because it had somehow acquired a rattle and every night it came to the house bawling and rattling and trying in vain to get in. I heard it too and we all hid in

the wardrobe, terrified. My aunt told us not to be such big buck eedgits for it was only a stray cat but we knew it wanted in to get us. When I got home and told my brothers and sisters about the ghosts they just laughed and told me they divided everything I said by at least ten.

All this took place in County Down in Northern Ireland, way back in the last century when I was a child. It was like Middle Earth to me with its lovely waters and drumlins and standing stones and mountains and hazel woods. It was like living in a fable. And the people were so friendly then, for they weren't killing each other quite so much, before the Troubles. I loved my village but my cousin couldn't wait to leave; he remembered it as a hard, mean, sectarian hole. At seventeen he ran away to India to find Nirvana – with a spotted neckerchief full of buns on a stick over his shoulder, as a nod to our fables, but he didn't take it on the Belfast bus.

We didn't have Guy Fawkes Night celebrations like English children.

Halloween was our big festival – we had a week off school. I was a keen pagan and had a fine show of assorted skulls hanging from my bedroom ceiling. We'd comb the beach for driftwood and raid the common dump for tyres and old furniture and we'd build our bonfire high. Our Jack O Lanterns were carved out of turnips which was tedious work and they stank and shrivelled when lit. We picked bulrushes from the lakeside and soaked their black pelts in paraffin for they made excellent torches and we paraded through the village, masked and cloaked, and my father said we looked like insurrection. We had fireworks but when the Troubles came they were banned. Mammy's apple pies were perilous with silver sixpences and curtain rings and our house would smell of cinnamon, cloves and hot sugar for she'd bake all day and make toffee apples too. We'd dress up and go knocking on doors and sing songs about

fattening geese and Christmas coming. We always got sweets but never money. Legend said that if you looked in the midnight mirror by candlelight on Halloween you might see the face of the man you would marry. We'd search the depths of the looking glass, dreading horns, pitchforks, cloven hoofs, or the devil's lecherous face appearing.

Later we'd crack nuts around the fire and Granny would tell us stories. She had known actual fairies and she said they had a vicious streak and not to get on the wrong side of the little bastards for they were that thran and vengeful. She always heard the Banshee wailing before a death and once, in the haunted woods of Coola, saw a hanged man swinging from an elder tree and the next day a fiery thunderbolt came down her chimney and chased her around the house. We'd hear Daddy singing obscene songs as he staggered home from the pub and Mammy would rush us to bed, shouting, 'Hide! Quick it's your Da! Hide!' and Granny would shake her head and waddle home and Daddy would crash into the house and we'd hear him arguing in diverse tongues with himself before we fell asleep. My mother was the seventh child of a seventh child and could tell fortunes. The gypsies used to come to our house to have Mammy read their tea-leaves but they always left before my Da came home for he was fierce and hated everyone that wasn't us and he just about tolerated us.

Our house had been my father's family holiday home. They were Dublin Protestants and would come up from the south every summer to stay there. Despite its fine location it was a primitive, rickety house – great for the summer months but not a place to rear five children. It had no bathroom and only an outside toilet and no hot water. We only had one fire and we all bunched around it as the winter winds shrieked around the walls. We all had weak chests and each year got bronchitis and terrible

colds and influenzas. When I caught pneumonia it was lovely because, each night, a man in a top hat would come and recite poetry to me. No one else saw ever him but I've loved poetry ever since. I got to read so many books that when I did return to school I was almost a genius, except in maths and science and sport. I got put into the top group. The school was only a hill away from my house but I was always late as a matter of principle and I got caned twice on each hand. Corporal punishment had been banned in England but still enthusiastically practiced in Northern Ireland then. My friend and I would hang ourselves up on hooks and pretend to be coats in the cloakroom when the assembly was kept back so the teachers could hunt down the latecomers.

Our house was stiff with antiques and junk. My mother, foraging in church halls and auctions brought home wonders: stuffed animals, lousy fur coats, fox furs, dolls' tea-sets, and various broken instruments which we mended and learned how to play and we all became gifted musicians. She got me a heavy Edwardian typewriter for I wanted to be a writer and live in a Georgian house in Dublin. At the castle auction she bought a dress-maker's dummy and a job lot of a thousand books. Most of the books were dreary, ecclesiastical tomes but some were classics. She used to read Dickens aloud to us and I remember her crying over Nancy getting done in by Sykes. Once we got our electricity turned off for non-payment and I came home from school to find Mammy cooking on the fire and weeping and the room full of smoke. It was cut off for months and when it was reconnected our house was minging and we all had bruises from bumping into the furniture in the dark.

My sister and I shared a room and we had a line drawn down it. Her side had the piano and the bust of Beethoven and mine had skulls and books. The dressmaker's dummy stood in the no-man's land between our beds. It was useless for making

clothes as it was deformed with a dreadful stoop. I had drawn a face on the flesh coloured neck and I used to scare my sister with it. I'd slowly turn it so she would think it was giving her evils. She would cry out and ask me if I saw it moving and I would pretend to snore and then inch it a little more. She got her own back by getting up early to practice the piano. Although she was only eleven years old her favourite tune was Chopin's *Death March* which she did play very well - especially the resurrection bit.

Mammy was very creative and naturally green, everything was recycled: jumpers unravelled and reknit, dresses unpicked and redesigned, bones boiled up for soup. She could make anything except money – *Make do and mend* was one mantra and *Necessity is the mother of invention* another. She was as hopeful as Micawber and used to say: *To hell with poverty – throw another pea in the pot*. She was a dressmaker but did not like to charge for her work and often sewed for nothing for she was so nice, to her own detriment. She made us wonderful, unusual clothes and we did not look like anyone else in the village. She made me a purple velvet cloak for I was the first Goth in the village and was always to be found sighing in the graveyard writing poetry. In between the drudgery Mammy would paint watercolours and write her poetry and I still feel sad when I think about her hard, unfulfilled life. She had been offered a scholarship for art school but refused it because she felt it her duty to earn her keep and she had that dammed, *sure that's not for the likes of me*, lack of expectation that is the scourge of the working classes.

The castle at the top of our village was built on the site of a Norman tower. A tunnel from it led underneath the lough to Castle Island where the nonconformists worshipped under the penal laws. The entrance was in the long avenue of the ABC

trees where the Cromwellian soldiers had been buried after the siege. Hans Sloane, who started the British Museum but more importantly brought back chocolate from the West Indies, was a local boy who was educated in the castle library. I got a summer job there, looking after the young heir. The walls of the castle were so thick that I once missed a thunder storm! When the gentry were off on their annual killing spree in Scotland I sneaked my family in for afternoon tea served on the Charles the first dining table. We ate scones from Wedgewood plates and cocked our little fingers, aping the aristos. The heir was a biddable, flaxen-haired child and I'd tell him stories, sitting by the mullioned window in the library where I had discovered his sisters' secret stash of bonbons. I was fascinated with all things occult and I once played Ouija board in the dining- room, with my best friend, conjuring up the castle's Blue Lady, a murderous grandee, with pale hooded eyes whose portrait dominated the banqueting hall. We fled down the tower's curving stairs when we heard her silk gown rustling behind us.

The castle girls had a lovely little pony, Fingal, but he must have been a pygmy for when I sat on him my feet trailed on the ground. Fingal used to groan and pant when I mounted him. I had to do all the work and propel him forwards with my feet. He was a crap pony. Not once did I get him to trot let alone gallop. He died a month after I left and the castle girls stopped me in the street one day and accused me of killing him by being a big lump. After that I despised the rich castle girls and I was quite glad when the village took umbrage with their father's altruistic attempts to form an Alliance party, between the warring tribes, for he only succeeded in uniting them briefly enough to burn an effigy of him on his own lawn. I recall a crisp November night, the moon full over the battlements, flaring torches - like a scene from a Frankenstein movie when the angry peasants storm the citadel. I was a cub reporter by

then, for a local newspaper, and I remember leaning against the gatehouse in my grey trench-coat, Trilby hat and fag in my mouth, describing it all in my best Pitman's shorthand. I enjoyed being a reporter but the inquests I reported on got bloodier and bloodier as the Troubles progressed as did the court cases. I used to hitch lifts to work and each morning the local magistrate would stop and pick me up. One morning I waited and waited but he did not come and I discovered he'd been shot dead on his doorstep in front of his kids.

I got pregnant as a teenager and had to run away to London to get married and become an adult and parent. My husband and I were different religions and it was not a good time for mixed marriages. I was so homesick I cried for months and my mother had to send me seaweed to sniff to placate my grief. My childhood is still so vivid to me but I know it is a lost and vanished world, one I can only return to in my dreams.

About the author

Alison Marr, originally from Northern Ireland is a musician and songwriter based in London. She studied Creative Writing at the OU and writes short stories and poetry and is currently working on a collection of fairy tales set in Kilburn. When not writing she plays jigs and reels on her mandolin.