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Opening extract from

The Golden Day

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1967

"Let It All Hang Out"
The Hombres

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All on a Summer's Day

THE YEAR BEGAN with the hanging of one man and ended with the drowning of another. But every year people die and their ghosts roam in the public gardens, hiding behind the grey, dark statues like wild cats, their tiny footsteps and secret breathing muffled by the sound of falling water in the fountains and the quiet ponds.

"Today, girls," said Miss Renshaw, "we shall go out into the beautiful garden and think about death."

The little girls sat in rows as the bell for morning classes tolled. Their teacher paused gravely. They gazed up at her, their striped ties neat around their necks, their hair combed.

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"I have to tell you that something barbaric has happened today," said Miss Renshaw in a low, intent voice. "At eight o'clock this morning, a man was hanged."

Hanged! Miss Renshaw had a folded newspaper in her hand. She hit it against the blackboard. The dust rose, and the little girls jumped in their seats.

"In Melbourne!"

In Melbourne! They did not really even know where Melbourne was. Melbourne was like a far-off Italian city to them; it was Florence or Venice, a southern city of gold and flowers. But now they knew that it was cruel and shadowy, filled with murderers and criminals and state assassins. In Melbourne there was a prison with a high wall, and behind it in a courtyard stood a gallows, and a man named Ronald Ryan had been hanged at eight o'clock that morning.

Hanged… Who knew what else went on in Melbourne? That's what Cubby said. But Icara, who had been to Melbourne with her father on a train that took all night, shook her head.

"It's not like that," she said. "It's just like here, only there aren't so many palm trees."

Trust Icara to notice something peculiar like palm trees when people are being cut down on the street and carried away and hanged, thought Cubby.

Miss Renshaw beckoned at the little girls to leave their seats and come forward. They gathered around her, their long white socks pulled up to their knees.

"What did he do, Miss Renshaw?" asked Bethany, the smallest girl in the class. She had small legs and small hands and

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a very small head. But her eyes were luminously large. "The man who was hanged?"

"We won't worry about that now," said Miss Renshaw, avoiding Bethany's alarming stare. "Whatever he did, I ask you, is it right to take a man and hang him, coldly, at eight o'clock in the morning?"

It did seem a particularly wicked thing to do, the little girls agreed, especially in the morning, on such a warm and lovely day, when everything in it was so alive. Better to hang a person at night, when it was already sad and dark.

Miss Renshaw banged the newspaper again, on the desk this time. The little girls huddled backward.

"So today, girls, we will go outside into the beautiful garden and think about death."

Miss Renshaw was nuts – that's what Cubby's mother said. "Still, you've got to do what she says, Cubby. Remember, she's the teacher."

"But what if she tells us to jump in the river seven times to cure us of leprosy?" asked Cubby, thinking of the Bible story that one of the senior prefects, Amanda, had read out loud in chapel.

> *And Eli'sha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean!"*

Up rose the voice of Amanda like smoke from behind the wooden eagle upon which the large Revised Standard Version

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of the Bible was laid out. Amanda's name meant "fit-to-be-loved" in Latin; Miss Renshaw had told them so. She was fit-to-be-loved, with her long, fair plaits as thick as the rope that the deckhands threw to tie the ferry to the wharf on the trip home from school. Everyone admired Amanda, and not only for her hair.

"Well, one step at a time," said Cubby's mother. "Let's wait and see if you get leprosy first."

Now Miss Renshaw stepped forward, leaving the newspaper on the desk. Miss Renshaw was tall, noble and strong. Her hair was red and springy. She was like a lion. She stood at the classroom door, waiting while the little girls found their broad-brimmed, blue-banded hats, in preparation for leaving the safety of the school grounds.

Theirs was a very small class. There were only eleven of them, like eleven sisters all the same age in a large family. Cubby, Icara, Martine, Bethany, Georgina, Cynthia, Elizabeth, Elizabeth, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth, and silent Deirdre. Because it was such a very small class, they had a very small classroom, which was perched right at the top of the school. Up four flights of stairs, way up in the sky, like a colony of little birds nesting on a cliff, blown about by wind with the high, airy sounds of the city coming up the hill in the ocean breeze.

"Girls!" called out Miss Renshaw, smoothing her springy hair as they ran to tumble down the stairs, sixty-seven steps in total. "Hold hands and do not run."

Cubby grabbed Icara's hand, just as she had on the very first day she had arrived at the school, terrified and alone. Cubby

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preferred Icara to Martine or Georgina or Cynthia or Bethany or Deirdre or Elizabeth or Elizabeth or Elizabeth or Elizabeth, although the last Elizabeth wasn't so bad; she had a little brother who couldn't walk and had to go to a special school on a special bus and once Cubby had been to her house when her little brother was home, and they had pushed him around the garden in his wheelchair and how he had laughed as he threw back his thin neck, laughing out loud like a kookaburra.

The little girls moved in a cloud down from the classroom through the playground, to wait, as they had been taught, hand in hand at the yellow gate that led out to the big world. Miss Renshaw moved among them across the stone pathway. She wore a drooping crimson dress with a geometrical pattern of interlocking squares and triangles in green and purple. Around her neck on a string of leather swung a tear-shaped amber bead that glinted in the sunlight.

"Now, girls," said Miss Renshaw, "no screaming, squealing, or screeching. Remember, outside these walls, you are representing the school."

She turned the latch. The gate swung open with the softest creak, and out they ran, eleven schoolgirls in their round hats with their socks falling down, hand in hand, like a chain of paper dolls.

Miss Renshaw strode majestically at the rear in her droopy geometrical dress. She had no trouble keeping up with them, even though she was old. Of course, she wasn't as old as some of the teachers in their school. How frightened Cubby had been on her first day – she had never seen so many old women! Their

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hair was white and grey or even yellow, and they smelled of ancient perfumes and powders and cigarettes. One teacher was so bent over she was like an old washerwoman from a fairy tale, her face always to the ground, scuttling off into the dim linoleum-floored hallways with books under her arm, muttering to herself. Another wore a net in her hair – Cubby had never heard of such a thing – and several had buns piled on top of their ancient, powerful faces, like African women in books bringing home pitchers of water from the well.

The little girls ran down the back lane behind the school, between the stinking mounds of rubbish and gurgling drains. They ran by sleepy, barefooted men and half-dressed women smoking on their doorsteps, and along the short wall outside the smudged church that lay under the shadows of the towers of flats. Their black shoes clattered one after another down the sandstone stairs, heading for the trees and bubbling water of the Ena Thompson Memorial Gardens.

"Wait!" boomed Miss Renshaw as they reached the edge of the street. "Do not cross until I say so!"

Cars rolled by. A dog was barking. They bumped together on the footpath, waiting.

"Stand still so I can count you," said Miss Renshaw. "Have we lost anyone?"

Across the road above their heads rose the tangled fence, with swirling metal words painted in gold in the shape of an arch. A glistening spiderweb dangled down from the *M* of *Memorial*. Miss Renshaw held her hand up in the air, her long fingers waving like pale streamers.

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"Ten, eleven. Bethany, your hat is dirty. Elizabeth – yes, you, Elizabeth – pull up your socks. Cubby, your shoelaces are coming undone. I don't expect to take such grubby little girls into a public place. Remember why you are here."

Why were they here? They frowned at one another. Oh, yes, to think about death…

"Look both ways and cross carefully."

Cubby bent down to tie her laces. With her head upside down, she caught sight of the water through the fence and the greenery, patches of the great Pacific Ocean rolling in icy steel-grey waves, beyond all the yachts and ferries and rowboats, on through Sydney Harbour, on and on all the way to Tahiti, all the way to the Sandwich Isles, thought Cubby, where Captain Cook sailed on his little boat and was eaten up.

"Wait for me, Icara!" shouted Cubby, straightening up, seeing Icara skip across the road through the warm, purple-smelling air. She could feel her lace was still undone but there was no time to stop and fix it now.

"Icara! Cubby! Stay together!" called Miss Renshaw after them.

Wait for me.

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Into the Beautiful Garden

THEY ALL KNEW, even tiny, big-eyed Bethany knew, the real reason Miss Renshaw wanted to go out into the gardens that morning. It was not to think about death. Miss Renshaw wanted to see Morgan.

Morgan worked in the gardens. They had met him there one day when they arrived with pencils and sheets of blank paper to do drawings of leaves for natural science class. Morgan had been sitting under the great, creaking fig tree by the seawall, his back against the trunk, his eyes closed, smoking a cigarette.

"Like Buddha under the banyan tree," said Miss Renshaw later, "waiting for enlightenment."

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Was it enlightenment? Or was it the noise of the children that made Morgan open his eyes? He had beautiful eyes – soft, brown, wet with tears, like a stuffed toy. He stubbed out his cigarette and stood up, tall in his muddy boots, blue shirt and trousers, and a floppy grey hat.

"Good morning, ladies," he said, putting his hand to his dandelion-soft beard.

The little girls wandered away. They were not interested in Morgan. But Miss Renshaw was. She leaned against the seawall with him, and they looked out at the Pacific Ocean and Morgan told her all about himself. Morgan worked in the Ena Thompson Memorial Gardens, mowing the lawns, pulling out weeds, planting flowers, trimming bushes, sweeping paths, cutting branches from the trees, keeping the water of the duck pond and its wedding-cake fountain clear of weeds.

Morgan was a poet as well as a gardener, Miss Renshaw told them later, when they had returned to the classroom.

"I knew he was a poet," Miss Renshaw said, "before he even opened his mouth to say good morning."

"How did you know?" asked Georgina curiously.

Miss Renshaw didn't say. She just knew. Miss Renshaw loved poetry.

"And even more than poetry, I love poets," avowed Miss Renshaw. "The person who has said 'My life is to make poetry' is a brave person."

"Why brave?" asked the tallest Elizabeth.

"Because poets are poor," said Miss Renshaw.

"Why are they poor?"

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"People need poetry, but they won't pay for it," Miss Renshaw explained. "The great hope of a poet, girls, is to find a patron. Someone who will provide them with money and even a haven of peace and tranquillity while they write their poetry."

"Like a husband," suggested Georgina.

"In some ways," conceded Miss Renshaw, a little frostily.

"Why do you need money? Is it very expensive to write poetry?" asked Cubby, puzzled.

"It's hard to have a job when you're writing poems," said Cynthia in a worldly sort of way.

Why? wondered Cubby, although she did not say so out loud. Her father took the train to work and back every morning and evening, twenty minutes each way into the city. He could write a poem every day on the train in both directions. At that rate, he could write ten poems a week.

But not Morgan. Morgan was a real poet – poor, handsome, clever, and even famous, Miss Renshaw said, if you spoke to the right people.

"Are his poems in books?" asked the oldest Elizabeth.

"Morgan is widely published," said Miss Renshaw evasively.

"Can you write poems too, Miss Renshaw?" asked Bethany, with her big eyes.

"We can all write poems," replied Miss Renshaw, "if we allow ourselves. But we need to feel free to write poetry. We need to stop thinking of the facts, and think more about our feelings."

"Let it all hang out," agreed Cynthia.

Cubby pictured the family washing on the clothesline in

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the backyard – shirts, skirts, shorts and underwear, spinning in the wind.

"How do you write a poem?" asked long-haired Elizabeth, tossing her tight black plaits back over her shoulders.

"Aha!" said Miss Renshaw. "Now, that is the question. You need to get out of here to write real poetry. You need to get away, outside these walls, these floors."

She stamped her foot on the linoleum beneath them, splotched with old chewing gum and the remains of crawling insects. She stamped on the overhanging gloom of indoors, the narrow benches, the damp bricks and the chapel of hidden windows, wood and brass and cloth.

"You must look up into the sky, open your minds, your eyes, your hearts! Poems will appear in the open air!" Miss Renshaw cried. "You need to reach out and grasp the words from the sunlight. Most of all, you must stop thinking. That's the real secret. Stop thinking."

How? thought Cubby. *How can you stop thinking?*

"We must get away from this place," said Miss Renshaw, shaking her springy head. "Away from this school, this institution. Then we can find true poetry. To go far, far away into nature, grass, water, the huge sky and the deep brown earth."

Although, not that far, it turned out. Just as far as the Ena Thompson Memorial Gardens. Back they went, several times, with pencils and sheets of lined paper, to write poetry. Miss Renshaw did not write any poems, though, not that they saw.

"Run away, girls," Miss Renshaw would say as they passed

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through the archway into the gardens. "Go and listen to the running water, then pick up your pencils and write a poem about it. I will stay here in the shade and talk with Morgan."

Obediently, gladly, the little girls would run away through the heavy-branched trees and careful rosebushes, across the samples of grasses from South America. They would stand and listen to the bubbling fountain, and the clip-clopping of the ducks as they paddled about the glossy pond.

This was just the sort of thing you should be able to write a poem about. But when Cubby listened to the fountain, it only made her think of the broken cistern in the toilets under the gym, mossy and dank and smelling like a dead body mixed up with old cartons of rotting milk. You couldn't write a poem about that, could you? Although Icara said you could write poems about horrible things just as much as beautiful things.

"Did Miss Renshaw tell you that?" asked Cubby, feeling doubtful.

"I don't need Miss Renshaw to tell me how to write a poem," replied Icara scornfully.

Icara and Miss Renshaw did not get on.

"Miss Renshaw doesn't like me," Icara told Cubby.

"Icara is too much of an individualist," Miss Renshaw would say with a sigh, which usually meant that Icara disagreed with Miss Renshaw.

"We're enemies," said Icara.

"Why?" asked Cubby, alarmed. Enemies? Enemies were countries, tanks and planes, soldiers in uniforms with helmets and guns, not ordinary people in classrooms.

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Icara shrugged. "I don't know," she said. She didn't seem to care particularly. "It might be because my father is a judge."

It was true: Icara's father was a judge. He sat in court in red robes and a white wig and sent people to prison. Or worse. No wonder Miss Renshaw didn't like Icara. After all, it must have been a judge who decided that Ronald Ryan was to be taken away and hanged until he was dead.

"Miss Renshaw hates me," said Icara.

"We must work together for the common good," Miss Renshaw declared one morning. "Icara is too reserved. *Reserved* is a synonym for *distant,* which is a synonym for *far, far away.* What is another word for *far away*?"

This was a kind of game. Miss Renshaw would say a word and see how long a chain of similar words they could make.

"Remote," said Georgina.

"Isolated," said Elizabeth with the plaits.

"Far-flung," said Cynthia through a mouthful of pink meringue she was secretly eating underneath the desk, and that was the end of the chain; nobody could thing of anything else.

Far-flung, wrote Miss Renshaw on the board in yellow chalk.

Far-flung

Miss Renshaw had large, round, sloping, marvelously neat blackboard writing. Nobody could write on the blackboard like Miss Renshaw. "Icara is far-flung."

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But with Cubby, Icara was not far-flung. She was nearby-close-at-hand-a-stone's-throw-away. They were friends without either of them really knowing why. It was as though after that first day, when Icara had taken hold of Cubby's frightened hand, she had never let it go. Cubby and Icara could sit together in the playground or on the bus or in the library not saying much for hours, just a lovely rhythmic silence, like the sound of breathing when you're asleep.

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