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Opening extract from

Maddigan's Fantasia

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Losing Ferdy

Hello this is Garland Maddigan writing things down. I don't know why I am writing them down because when you write it's mostly because you've trying to tell somebody else something but right now – I'm telling myself – me! – things I already know. Or maybe I half-know them and writing them down finishes them off in my head so that I know them properly. Written down things seem true. Weird!

Stretched out among the ferns on the small tangled hillside, her red curls burning among the green leaves and fronds, Garland Maddigan closed the cover of the book she had been writing in, though still holding her writing place in it with one finger. She looked at its battered blue cover admiringly. No doubt about it. A book! A thick book of actual pages . . . paper pages . . . empty pages. Closing her eyes she rippled her thumb across their edges. Once, she knew, the world had been filled with paper, but the Destruction turned most of it to ashes. These days, even though the Destruction and the Chaos that followed it were times of the past, even though the world had been slowly remaking itself for years, paper was not always easy to come by once you moved out of the cities. And inside the cities it was often expensive. Here she

was with a whole empty book of it, found in one of those ruined houses, those empty shells twisted in gardens gone wild, lasting on in the tangled forests on either side of the road. She could move her secret thoughts from inside to outside, and then, by closing that blue cover, she could trap them before they flitted away from her. After all, soon she would be thirteen and her childhood (along with all the things that had patched her childhood together) would be fading into the past. Better write the days down before they got away from her altogether. These pages – these white spaces – were hers and hers alone. She was going to tell her secret thoughts to that mysterious reader she felt taking shape on the other side of the paper.

Down at the bottom of the hill a little plain, slightly scooped like a begging hand, reached out of a small forest of old trees stretching bare branches towards the next hill. (After all, though the sun was shining so warmly it *was* winter.) And there, on the edge of scrubby bush that fringed the true forest (trees that never lost their leaves), Garland's moving home, the Fantasia, was laid out like a strange garden set within a crescent; tents, old and sometimes patched, had the look of gallant, coloured flags. There was her home – half bus, half caravan, a crested tower pointing upward from its roof, rather as if a little castle were struggling to hatch itself out of the old van. The Fantasia dressed not only its clowns and acrobats in astonishing clothes, but turned the vehicles that carried it along the left-over tracks of the wild world into a bright and shifting village on wheels. There was the food wagon, hung with pots and pans. Bailey, the mapreader, was carefully wiping dust out of them. He turned as Maddie, Garland's mother, walked by, and shook his duster at her. It promptly turned into a bunch of flowers which he held out to Maddie. It was a trick they were both used to, but she laughed and Bailey laughed with her. The wind crept in under the canvas of the tents so that the canvas

rose and fell, and the whole Fantasia looked as if it were laughing along with them. Below there, in that strange garden, people were working hard: checking the horses, practising their routines, packing and repacking, fixing the frills round the necks of the dogs, then clapping their hands for them to leap through their hoops, dance on their hind legs or spin like barking tops.

Vans and wagons were parked in a wide semicircle. Garland now saw her mother join her father, Ferdy the ringmaster, bright in his scarlet coat – not the one he wore for performances but an old one he put on when the wind was cold. The Fantasia was slow to throw anything away. She watched her parents, walking side by side, and holding hands as they checked coils of rope, or bent side by side over solid, impassive boxes, watched them pat the panting tents and laugh to one another. Yves, her father's second-in-command, walked a step or two behind them, and Boomer, that irritating boy (a sort of adopted cousin-brother), zoomed around on his small motorized bike, the treasure of his life, trying to look as if he, too, was one of the people in charge. But Boomer loved machines and perhaps machines liked Boomer. They certainly seemed to do what he told them to do. But perhaps Boomer *needed* to feel he was in charge of something. He was a Fantasia orphan, half-adopted by old Goneril the Fantasia witch who complained about him, but who made sure he had plenty to eat, and who stuck up for him when anything went wrong. And there was Goneril herself, standing outside her van which was painted with magic symbols, probably grumbling (for grumbling was her hobby). Even when the weather was fine and things were going well, Goneril always found something to grumble about. Looking down on them all, it suddenly seemed to Garland that she was watching two families . . . her own parents, of course, but also that other wider family – the Fantasia itself, that family of

tumblers and grumblers related to her by wonders and work, travel and trickery . . . Maddigan's Fantasia. There they were – all of them – Tane the chief clown and a lively acrobat, Penrod who looked after the horses and flipped on the trapeze. There were Byrna and Nye the stilt walkers, there was old Goneril of course, and dreamy Bannister with one book tucked under his arm (even though he was strapping up a bundle of something), and another in his back pocket. Books, books, always books with Bannister. And there, of course, was Ferdy – descended directly from the first Maddigan, Gabrielle – walking with her mother, Maddie, who was not only a mother but an acrobat, and a knife thrower as well (though her knives had blades like stars or new moons). There they were, all those special people, laid out like pieces in a bright game . . . and beyond them, all around them, the damaged land that held still while you looked at it, but which seemed to spin and shift and tangle, turning tricks of its own once you looked away.

Garland flipped her book open again and began her writing. Funny that scribbling things down like this should be making her feel so altered . . . so powerful. The short stub of pencil, hard to hold but carefully sharpened, left its silver track across the page.

Ok . . . perhaps there is someone on the other side of the page who is reading what I am writing. Hey you! Hello there! Who are you? I suppose you'll have to read all this in a backwards way, like Alice in that Looking Glass story which my mother read to me. I'll start off telling you who I am. I am Garland Maddigan . . . a true-born Maddigan . . . part of Maddigan's Fantasia . . . the greatest circus in the world. We travel most of the year from place to place, joking, dancing, doing a thousand tricks. We cross the nowhere – the hundreds

of nowheres – that lie between the camps and communities and towns and left-over cities of the world. I am twelve, well, almost thirteen, and I have red hair, a true Maddigan colour. I can do a bit of magic, but my true power is walking the tightrope. I can even turn flips on it, and that's a true Maddigan power – the power to do tricks I mean. We're a trickster family.

Garland paused, then began writing again.

I don't know if the world counts as the world any more, not since the poisonings and then the wars of the Destruction which all took place ages ago . . . back before the days of Gabrielle Maddigan who counts as our first Maddigan in a way, though there must have been Maddigans before her. I know that once upon a time there used to be a great world made up of different lands with oceans between them. I know that people sailed across the oceans and even flew through the air. But then the world growled like a mad dog, and tore itself to pieces (which was what we call the Destruction). And then for a while there were the plagues and a sort of dissolving of everything (which was what we call the Chaos), and for another while after that there was almost nothing . . . well, there must have been something, but nothing that was written down or saved. It was like that for years and years. And then, just before our own time, the Remaking began, when things began to come together again.

Anyhow we are the left-over people going between the left-over places . . . place to place . . . place to place . . . on and on and on . . . and as we go everything

alters. Old paths twist and swallow themselves. Some roads stay put, but others just seem to disappear. Lucky us! We have our maps, even though they are falling to bits, and we have Bailey our mapreader. He's very clever. It almost seems he can read words that have fallen off the paper and read the minds of roads and tracks too, so when they strangle themselves and vanish (as they often do) Bailey knows exactly where they'll pop up again. And we all have the names of the towns in our heads. After a while I think our heads actually turn into maps, and when the roads do reappear again I think it is because the Fantasia has dreamed them back into being real.

I love being part of the Fantasia but sometimes I love spending time on my own – like now – when I'm working things out and asking myself questions. Like will I ever grow up properly? Will there be room out there for a grown-up me? Will I ever get married? Of course I'll never leave the Fantasia but there's no one in the Fantasia I could marry. Well, there is Boomer of course. But I could never fall in love with Boomer – he's only a kid, and anyway he'd only love me if I was a clockwork girl with wheels instead of feet. There's Bannister, maybe, but he's way older than I am, and anyhow he's already in love. In love with books and people in stories, so . . .

'Garland!' someone shouted urgently. She knew her father's voice. Garland looked up sharply

'Garland,' came a chorus of echoing voices. Some of them were real echoes, but among them she could make out Boomer's voice and the piping cry of Lilith, the bossy daughter of Yves, her father's right-hand man. None of them were

voices she wanted to hear just then, for it was just great being a runaway hidden high on a hillside and looking down on the Fantasia . . . being a true, pure self without a couple of kids dancing around her, trying to get her attention. But her father had called her in a voice she could not ignore.

'Garland!' he was calling again, shouting and looking left and right, and this time she knew for sure that something had gone wrong.

'Garland! Quickly!' screamed yet another voice, Maddie's voice. 'Now! Oh lord, they're coming!' No way out of it! She must go. Go now!

She leapt up, sliding the book into the front of her coat and pushing the pencil stub back into her pocket. And it happened again.

The air between her and the Fantasia below rippled as if wind from another world were blowing through it . . . and a shape, coming out of nothing, seemed to struggle towards her . . . a silvery-grey shape as if an unseen pencil were drawing on the air in front of her.

Several times over the last year Garland had seen the air ripple like this in front of her, had seen that shivering mist struggling to take on some shape but always dissolving back into nothing. Garland stared at it, a little frightened, but curious too.

'What are you?' she cried aloud. 'OK! What do you want to *tell* me.' She'd asked this before but there had never been any answer.

'Garland!' screamed the voices down below.

'Look! I've got to go!' she said. 'I've got to go!'

No time to worry about any mere ghosts! She must run right through them . . . run through silver mist, and the scrub and duck in under the trees

'Garland! Now! Now!' Maddie was shouting, and really there was nothing to do but to run.

Below her the Fantasia was seething. The horses were being drawn in among the caravans and all vans were being swung around. The Fantasia must stop being a village and become an armed fort, for it was being attacked, and it was too late for Garland to join them. Ferdy, racing from one van to another, looking desperately up at the hillside as he ran, saw her and pointed her out to Maddie.

'Down! Down!' yelled Maddie and Ferdy together, both swinging their arms, flattening the air in front of them, and Garland obediently flattened herself among the tussock and the broom bushes that grew on the lower slopes of the hillside, panting a little and staring between the brown-green stems, trying to work out just what was happening. She heard them before she saw them of course – the snarling of motorbikes as they were kicked into life – the roar of their attack.

Road Rats! She should have guessed. Road Rats! And by the sound of it a big gang of them.

Up from the river, out from the scrubby bush to the right of the Fantasia they came, the bikers first, gunning their machines to make a confusing sound, winding and zigzagging as they burst in on the Fantasia. After them came more men jogging ruthlessly, slung with bows, spears and occasional guns, straggling but quick and ferocious, determined to steal whatever they could get their hands on. Often Road Rats used clearer pieces of road as bait, knowing that an easy road would lure travellers, making it easy to trap and rob them. But the Fantasia was always alert, armed and ready for Road Rats. There came the peppering fire of guns. Penrod had a gun and Goneril had one too. She was a good shot. The rest of them depended on bows and arrows.

The Road Rats engaged with the front line of the Fantasia, a furious, confused struggle. Hand-to-hand combat now! Garland saw her mother's wild red skirt flying out, saw her dealing blows

right and left. She saw Yves embracing one of the Road Rats, a man with a crown tattooed around his bald head, as if they were long lost friends. But there, on the roof of the food van, Bailey suddenly collapsed and then slid sideways. Then, peering through the broom bushes Garland saw her father Ferdy bending at the knees, taking a staggering, sideways step, and toppling forward. Even from where she was, hidden in the scrub on the slope, Garland could see he had an arrow in his chest.

'No!' she screamed, leaping to her feet, dancing among the broom bushes, not caring in the least if the enemy saw her red curls like a fire suddenly blazing up in the broom. Maddie straightened, spun, and threw one of the silver stars she used in her juggling act. It flew through the air – a shooting star – shining and spinning and struck a Road Rat, biting deep into his neck. But the Road Rats were already in retreat . . . a slow double retreat since, off to one side a group of them had successfully closed in around the food van. Some of them had managed to scramble into the van. Its motor roared. It was being driven away while other Road Rats fought a rearguard action. She heard, as if from a great distance, the rattle of the pots and pans. As the van pulled away the Road Rats were already unhooking the noisy pots and flinging them off into the tussock. There was no way that the Fantasia people could get to their van without leaving themselves open to Road-Rat attack. But that was the skill of these attackers. One group would distract travellers with battle while another group, skirmishing off to one side, would steal what they could find and run for it. Though they were thin and weedy people – though they were less well-armed they greatly outnumbered the men and women of the Fantasia.

Two of their men, injured and left behind, crawled for cover, but all the Fantasia people cared about – all Garland could see – was her father . . . her fallen father.

'No!' she screamed again, as she began pelting down the hillside, briefly losing sight of the Fantasia as she twisted down into the trees, feeling them stretch out branches to catch and claw at her. She could hear the sound of those motorbikes roaring away into an unknown distance, and imagined Maddie and Yves gently drawing Ferdy back into the shelter of the caravans. Other men and women would be running to protect them, even though the Road Rats were skilfully melting away. As for their stolen van – it was already becoming part of the world beyond the road. Ferns would be leaping up around it like green jagged flames, and no one would be giving pursuit, for the Fantasia people would be too overwhelmed by Ferdy's fall. And Bailey had fallen too. She must not forget Bailey.

'Thieves! Mongrels!' she screamed, sliding and stumbling down the slope, imagining the Road Rats, now lost in the shelter of the bush, transforming, turning into twigs and leaves, stretching towards the sky or melting into the earth. And, as these pictures rushed incoherently through her mind, something struck her violently. Her feet slid from under her and her head exploded with zigzagging lights.

Just for a moment she could feel dead leaves under her hands and under her cheek as well. In her panic she had smashed blindly into the low branch of a tree. She got up. One step forward . . . another step . . . then out of the bush and into the cupped hand of the little plain. But she was going to fall. Her head was whirling and singing a strange wild song that was all its own. Pitching forward Garland knew she must rest – she absolutely *must* – rest her ringing head on the ground.

As she lay there, staring sideways and struggling to hold the dizzy darkness at bay, something strange happened somewhere to her right. A thin line of light, sharp and shining as the blade of a polished knife, cut the world in half. Two figures stepped through the gap . . . a tall boy, not just fair-headed like Boomer,

but golden-haired like the prince in a fairy tale, and a smaller boy who looked like a child of the trees, wild and brown and tangled. The taller boy was holding a great doll. No! That doll was waving its hands. It must be a baby. Electric streaks seemed to dance around them. Garland tried to push herself up on one elbow, but then conquering darkness swept in over her, and she collapsed down into the leaves and twigs once more.

'Garland!' a voice was exclaiming. 'There! Garland! You're waking up, aren't you?'

Garland was indeed waking up. But even before opening her eyes she knew she had been rescued. She had been found and carried back into the inner circle of the Fantasia. She could smell it. She could *feel* it. Byrne, one of the stilt walkers, was kneeling beside her, and she was embraced by the magic circle of the Fantasia vans and tents. She was safe – as safe as was possible for any member of a Fantasia travelling the dissolving road. Men were still guarding the slots between one van and another. Other men stood around behind the women who were bending over the fallen figures of Ferdy and Bailey the map-master. Garland could see her father's blue shirt and her mother's red skirt as she kneeled beside him. She could see old Goneril kneeling there too, directly opposite her mother, touching Ferdy's chest, then his forehead, then looking up and shaking her head. She could not see her mother's expression but she heard herself crying out yet again. 'No! No!' as she swung herself over onto all fours, forced herself up onto trembling legs, and then, supported by Byrne, who understood her urgent mood, staggered towards her mother.

Maddie turned, then held out one arm to her. Under her streaking tears her face was calm.

'Garland!' she said, 'Garland! I know! I know! But we've got to be tough. Tough! We've got to hold in there. It's what he

would want. This is Maddigan's Fantasia and we – you and me, that is – we are Maddigans.'

Garland flung herself against her mother, as if she might push right into her – as if they might somehow become the one person with the one grief. She couldn't be bothered with being brave and wept for Ferdy Maddigan, lying there dead, while the rest of Maddigan's Fantasia stood around being tough just as Ferdy would have wanted them to be.

A voice broke in on her grief. It was Yves, standing tall behind Maddie, though stained with blood from a knife wound that had cut down his left cheek and across his chest.

'Move on,' he said urgently. 'We must move on. If we move on now we can make the Horseshoe by nightfall. We'll have a bit of space there – space to bury them.'

'Mum . . .' cried Garland again but, though her mother's arm tightened around her, Maddie was looking away from Ferdy, past Garland and nodding at Yves. When she spoke her words were plain and determined but her voice was shaking.

'And Bailey's hurt . . .' she began. Her voice trembled then faded. Garland could feel her taking a deep breath, making herself strong.

'And Bailey's hurt, too,' she repeated, turning to look over at Goneril, now busy with Bailey. 'He won't be able to read the maps, will he?' Goneril shook her head. 'So! Who'll read the maps?'

'The road holds true as far as the Horseshoe,' Yves said. 'At least it used to. We'll think about directions then.' The Horseshoe – if it was still there – some miles down the road, was a place where they could camp in against a bank and would be partly protected by the curve of the land.

'Get there first and then we'll stop, take a breath and work things out,' said Yves, and once again Maddie nodded her agreement. Tears were still running down over her cheekbones,

but the face under those tears was stern and determined. She was trying to be a true Maddigan. Garland knew this. She knew Maddie had to be calm and strong. Yet at the same time she wanted to see Maddie crumpling and crying so that she could crumple and cry along with her. 'Get there first!' Maddie repeated, patting the horses, which snorted and shifted uneasily, probably disturbed by the scent of Ferdy's blood Garland thought, and then thought, 'Horses care more than people do.' She pulled a scarf up over her head and climbed up into the seat beside the driver's seat . . . beside her mother . . . knowing she was an entirely different girl from the girl she had been only a few minutes earlier. As they moved on she looked back over her shoulder thinking she would never forget that place . . . the hill, those broom bushes, the trees which had struck her down, that begging hand of a plain at the bottom of the hill and the tangled forest which had hidden the Road Rats and had then swallowed them once more.

And suddenly there they were again. She had imagined they must be dreams but they were real after all . . . that tall golden-headed boy holding the baby, and the smaller brown one, scruffy and wild. Longing to be distracted, Garland stared at them and took a breath, planning to point them out to Maddie. But then the two shapes . . . the tall one and the smaller one stepped back and disappeared into the scrub and there was nothing to point out to anyone else, and nothing to distract Garland from her savage sadness, which seemed as if it would be devouring her forever.